

The Legend of Cynder: Night Terrors

by GoldenGriffiness

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Summary: Shadows lengthen and Cynder's problems multiply. She's whisked away from frail peace again all too soon as the Eternal Night looms on the horizon. Can she overcome the shadows, both of the Dark Master and herself, before Malefor's night taints the realm forever? (Previously Shadow of the Eternal Night)

1. Prologue

(A/N. Hi! Firstly, I'm putting this up before I put up the epilogue for ANB, simply so I can say in a A/N on that this is up, you're welcome to wait and read that first, it shouldn't be too important either way. Secondly, several people have asked about the origins Myst's Lullaby and the LOC ANB end/ SotEN beginning theme. The name of the first is just "Myst's Lullaby," and the name of the ANB/SotEN theme is "Moonlight." They're both songs I wrote specifically for LOC, and I also have two others prepared for later. Finally, right when I post this it's not going to have been betad, as my beta is far around the earth and literally seems to go to sleep when I wake up in the morning. She will be betaing the rest of this story, as well as LOC's spin off crossover Legend of Cynder: Light in the Dark. You're all lucky that she's nice enough to put up with all my gruesome mistakes so you guys won't need to deal with them after this prologue. So a HUGE thank-you to River styxx. Finally, a gargantuan thank you to reviewers of ANB and any future reviews of EN, you're the reason I have any confidence in my righting abilities at all! Finally I'd like to thank the teacher who originally taught me to read and right, I'll call her Ms. T here, and to my parents who are the reason I'm so book obsessed. So sorry for the gargantuan authors note! It won't happen again, promise.)

A black dragon sighed, slashing the stone statue to pieces with her tailblade, and gracefully lowered herself into onto her haunches, staring out to blue water

Heh. Trainings well and good for now, but it'll do little good when

she calls meâ€œ! It's not like there's an enemy she can't defeat that I can._

She looked up at the two moons, glimmering in the darkened sky. They made her silvery stomach sparkle like starlight. How close the moons were to each other sent her gut lurching with apprehension.

Green eyes sparkling, the dragoness turned her back from the fluorescent moon, black scales glimmering blue from its reflection off the ocean. She stretched wings, membranes so translucent, light shone strait through, like she was a ghost.

The shadow of the Eternal night creeps up on all of us, the guardians must see it as well. It's time I taught all I have to teach. She'll need it if she's to survive and overcome the shadow the eclipse is going to cast.

Emerald eyes blinking close, the ethereal dragon murmured something to the light wind, softer than a prayer. "Stay strong young one, for the worst is yet to come."

Her words fell heavily on the air, ringing with an air of certainty bespeaking the prophecies of old.

Darkness comes, like a soul into sleep

Life goes on 'matter how you weep

Standing here, having come so far

Wish with me on a fallen star

Raise your wings, hold on tight

Don't forget there's still the moonlight

And when all seams lost and the end isn't near

Your heart will say where to go from here

Found you here, after journeys long

Feels like everything that could went so wrong

Choked up in the black of night

Feels like finally things are goin' right

Raise your wings, hold on tight

Don't forget there's still the moonlight

And when all seams lost and the end isn't near

Your heart will say where to go from here

Prey for those didn't make it this far

Grateful you escaped deaths door, still ajar

Raise your head, don't let those tears abide
Smile in the dark, even if teary eyed
Raise your wings, hold on tight
Don't forget there's still the moonlight
And when all seams lost and the end isn't near
Your heart will say where to go from here
Feels good having made it this far
Peace for now, just where we are
_My hearts just so full right nowâ€!
_Nothing will force head to bow!
Raise your wings, hold on tight
Don't forget there's still the moonlight
And when all seams lost and the end isn't near
Your heart will say where to go from here

2. MOTHER HEN

"Are you sure?" I looked at the little dragon concernedly, eyes showing with worry.

"Cyn, yes! I've said this over and over again!" Myst looked exasperated, which was completely out of character.

Not that I could blame her, with me fussing about her for the past few days like some kind of mother-hen on steroids.

My tail writhed on the floor like a serpent, the rough stone grating uncomfortably against my violet under-scales. "But what if something goes wrong? What if you have to use a fury?"

Myst finally snapped; something I had never seen and was not eager to see again.

"Cynder! The only one worried about this is you! Everyone else realizes that I have to do this! I can't depend on you forever, and I can't do this much longer! I remember, Cynder! I remember colours, and without them I'm going insane! Please just listen to me!" Her voice was shrill and loud, and I fell back on my haunches. To my shock, the little dragon stormed from the room, banging against the doorframe.

Sitting there, blinking, I looked after her.

She was right.

I couldn't imagine what was like; how could anyone who hadn't lost

their sight? For something so vital to be gone so suddenlyâ€|

But the furiesâ€| They were a necessity to any dragon in these dangerous times. What if she needed one? Or worse, what if she chose to use one?

Her furies would be incredibly powerful. Stronger than mine combined, it'd eat her up, body and soulâ€| And what would be left? Would there be any spirit left to join the ancestors at all?

I was pacing again, tail twitching back and forth. One of the statue's eyes seemed to follow me, and I glared at it, "What the hell do you think you're looking at?"

It didn't answer and I grumbled; if I kept this up much longer, it wouldn't surprise me if I wore one long welt in the seasoned stone.

"Talking to inanimate objects," I muttered to myself, "First sign of insanityâ€|"

"You're worried about her, aren't you?" I turned to see a muscular young dragon step in, burnished gold and purple flashing like stars in the low light.

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

He sighed. He'd gained a bit of confidence, but he still refused to take life. He was an incredible fighter â€" in the training arena. As soon as he was faced with a real, living, breathing enemy, he'd just freeze, muttering about the taking of life.

"She's tough; she'd be shattered by now if she wasn't. The fact she'll even talk to me without flinching shows how strong she is. The fact she's letting herself live is also testimony. I sure as hell couldn't do it, I'd have killed myself."

I glared down at my forepaws, "I know that! But she's just a babyâ€| My babyâ€|"

"No. She isn't. She ceased being a baby the day I tore her life and everything that matters in it away."

"Not your fault." It was an argument I'd stated many times before to no avail. He just ignored it, determined to blame himself for the General's crimes.

As suspected, he ignored that and continued, "You're only making this harder for her. If there's one thing she has from you, it's her stubbornness. The more you fight her, the harder she'll drive towards whatever you're trying to stop her doing."

His eyes were sad, "And in this, she happens to be right."

"I know, I knowâ€|" I was pacing yet again. I'd been in the temple for nearly a month and doing nothing was killing my nerves. I had no idea what was happening, and every day at sunset it was like my nerves were covered in hellfire.

"Cynder, she needs you more than ever right now, you have to stay

strong for her! You try so hard when it's you in danger, but if she doesn't believe it will work, it won't do anything and she'll be left without vision and furies!"

I sat down again with a solid plop, turning my head from Spyro, determined not to let anyone see the tears wetting my obsidian cheeks. Gulping to keep a sob from escaping, I sighed, "How Spyro? It's eating at me and I can't ignore itâ€| I don't know how much danger she's in because I don't know how willing she is to risk herselfâ€|"

Spyro sighed, "I can't answer that, but you need to try for her sake. Ask her to promise, if it helps; she loves you more than anything. I think she's smarter than you're giving her credit for, but it should grant you some peace of mind."

With a swish of his gold tailblade, he trod out.

A promiseâ€| I'd made her a promise once, one I was terrified I couldn't keep. But this wasn't something that other things could get in the way ofâ€| I nodded to myself, some worry fading, but not a lot.

A promise, I can do thatâ€|

With a quick glance around, revealing the only eyes trained on me were the cold-stone statues, I turned my head and rubbed the few tears that had leaked away.

Stretching like a cat, I paced towards Myst and my room. Now we'd been here for a solid length of time, we had removed rubble from a few rooms and set them up with make-shift nests. They weren't great, but they were better than sleeping on the cold ground I'd had to grow accustomed to.

"Mystâ€|" She looked, or tried to, in my direction. I sighed, "I'm sorry, I'm being ridiculous."

She sighed, nodded, and paced toward me, head leaning towards me and leaning against my shoulder once she found it. "I'm sorry tooâ€|"

I snorted, draping one wing over her, "Don't be. You have every right to be mad. In all my worries I forgot this is your choice, and this time it's my job to support you."

She smiled, "I still shouldn't have overreacted either. You're just worried about me, a lot like mom didâ€| At least with you I understand why."

I sighed, warm breath washing across the top of her head, "Can you just promise me something?"

"Mmmn?"

"Promise not to use a fury. I don't care what the circumstances are, just promise me for the little remaining peace of mind I haveâ€|"

She smiled, "Why would I? I'm not stupid, Cynder."

I sighed, "I know, I know, just promise me."

Eyes light, she grinned, "Promise! Can we go see if Terrador's done making it?"

I sighed, ghost of a smile appearing, "You're going to make my scales grey long before they need to be, you know that?"

Laughing, I led her to the pool-room, trying with all my heart to disguise the fear in my eyes.

3. ANYTHING WORTHWHILE

On the way to Terrador's room, we were interrupted by Sparx poking his head around the corner.

"You done being moody yet?" He'd been forced to avoid me the last few days; not even he was willing to put up with me in my worst mood yet.

I sighed, not in the mood to reprimand him for once, "Yeah, sure, whatever."

Looking at me, he blinked, but nodded and followed none-the-less.

We got to the vision's room and plodded in. Terrador glanced up from a slab of stone where he had several different plants and powders spread out, some in little nooks in the weathered stone slab.

"It is almost prepared," said the surly dragon before anyone had asked, "In fact, it will be done in a few moments."

I looked at my paws, sighing quietly. There goes my last shred of nervesâ€¦

Terrador sighed, pushing a woodened bowl towards me, "Cynder, would you fill this with water and return?"

I merely nodded, grabbing the handle that looped over the bowl between my teeth and lifting it. I rested my wing on Myst's warm shoulder for a moment before trotting off, tail dragging on rough stone.

In three of the rooms of the temple a fresh stream burbled through. The first room, upstream, was used for drinking. The second, downstream, swirled into a large pool, one end shallow and one deep, wide enough for two of the guardians to stand side by side. It served as a bath, while the last room served as a latrine. The river swirled underground after that, and none of them knew where it ended up.

I dipped the bucket into fresh water, pulling it up and heading back reluctantly. Helping with this felt a bit like weaving a rope for my own hanging.

I paced back into the room; Terrador had mixed all the herbs and powders together. He was hoping the added ingredients would serve to help with the unwanted side effect, but he assured us it was unlikely to do much good.

He nodded to me, and scooped the powder and pulverized plants into a smaller bowl. "Pour a small amount of the water into this bowl please, Cynder."

He'd been teaching me a bit about healing, so I knew that mixing it in with water would make it digest faster. I sat on my haunches, carefully lowering my head over the smaller bowl with its precious ingredients.

For a moment I pondered faking a spill, so Terrador would have to start over again, but I pushed the selfish thought aside. This had to happen.

I raised one forepaw and gently tipped the bucket, letting a thin stream of water spill into the ingredients. I stopped when Terrador told me, but left the rest of the bucket's contents at his request, as the combined herbs hardly tasted pleasant.

Terrador swirled the concoction around with one forepaw, until it became a semi-translucent green mixture from all the plant in it. He sighed, "It is done."

Heavy silence hung over us for a moment; it was Myst that broke it. "Wellâ€¦ Do I just drink it?"

Terrador nodded. "Yes," he said, for the blind Myst's benefit.

I stood there frozen for a moment, until Terrador raised an eyebrow, clearly asking if he should help her. I shook my head and carefully pulled the "cup" over. "It's here, Myst."

I gently tapped the stone, creating a soft thud that Myst could hear. In the time she'd been blind, she'd become an expert at pinpointing things through her other senses alone. Especially drinking from bowls â€" ever since we fixed the stream, I hadn't let her drink from it in fear she'd fall in. There'd be nothing anyone could do for her if she got trapped in the underwater channel between the drinking room and the bathing room. The latter two rooms had metal grating on either entrance of the waterway, but the one that had come between at the front of the first tunnel had worn away. Ignitus had told me he wasn't a sufficient enough blacksmith to repair or recreate it.

She lowered her head and took a tentative sip, flinching and wrinkling her small nose at the taste. I flinched as well, but for entirely different reasons. It was minutes before she lapped up the last of the stuff, and I wordlessly pawed the water over to where she sat. She lapped it up as well, gratefully smiling in my general direction.

Terrador smiled at us, "It will take quite some time for your vision to return fully, young dragoness. But it will in time."

I smiled. It was already done, no use stressing over spilt milk, "Everything that matters always does."

Myst leaned on my shoulder, sighing. "Look who's turning wise on us," she teased gently.

"Wise, her? Heck no!" Sparx replied, but I couldn't help but laugh.

...

I sighed, looking down at the mangled forepaw that caused me so much grief. Why was I here? I don't deserve to be here, I'm more trouble than I'm worth. Why do they even let me stay?

They seem to trust me, and I can't fathom why. They know just as well as I do that there's still dark crystal in me. I want it out, out so I can pretend that somehow, some way, I might forget the hell I'd forced on those I now care for. But doing that would be death, and I'm not ready to die yet, far from it.

The memories are still there, preying on my sleep; ill-fated nightmares that sap the little strength I have left. It feels like something's pulling on me, urging me somewhere. Probably away â€“ away from my supposed friends.

Heh, friends. Like I could be a true friend to them after the torment I'd put them through, the months tearing at them and laughing at their pain. It's not like it was someone else who'd done it. I remember doing it as me, taking pleasure in the sight of them bleeding on the cold ground. I couldn't bear it, not looking at the face of the little one who's heart and soul I destroyed.

I promise myself that as soon as the ache was gone in my bones and my power began to seep back into my veins, I would leave, distance myself. There isn't anything of use I could do here, except cause more pain.

Heh, running away are we? A little bit of me whispered.

Perhaps I am.

(A/N Hello, I'm sorry, this feels very filler-y to me, but I needed to get a few crucial facts in, and I'm sorry. Secondly, how do you lot feel about the little look into Spyro's mind? They'll definitely happen every once and a while, but if you think they're good or bad, tell me! And depending on the feedback I get I'll have more or less from Spyro's perspective. I love reviews more than vanilla ice cream! And that is saying a heck of a lot, so please review! XP)

4. TWO SHADES OF BLACK

I squinted at the runes, growling under my breath. Ignitus chuckled, looking down at the books with me. "You know, it'd help you learn if you looked more at the younger age level books. You can hardly learn from these."

"Yes," Volteer strode in. Perfect. "It is indeed true that a gradual raise in level will aid your appraisal capacity of figures quicker than throwing yourself right into the height of literature in itself. Your progress already is simply astounding as is."

I'd already looked at one of the 'younger reader's' books, "I _am not_ reading about some lost puppy. Ignitus, what's this word?"

He squinted at it, "That's 'quagmire.' It's no wonder you don't hear it, I've hardly heard it in common conversation."

"What's it mean?"

Volteer sighed, "It can either be a description of the environment of a wetland, swamp, such as surrounds this temple, or a sticky situation, a situation with many dead-ends and no way forward, a dangerous tim-"

I snorted, interrupting, "Sounds like my life, then, now doesn't it?"

"Yes, Volteer," Ignitus sighed, chuckling, shaking his head, "I'm sure she gets it. Now, you said you would help Cyril revitalize those scrolls."

Volteer grumbled and went off. I went back to glaring at the aged book. It was nothing like the few words that had been put to figures for the village. They'd take a sharp stick and carve the symbol for "danger," or "private," when necessary in the mushroom-trunks. If carved at the right depth the glowing sap would shine through, but not leak, causing the notification to glow bright amethyst. I used to have a blast sketching on the things when I was younger. If done right, it didn't hurt the plants and the drawings would last, glowing, as long as the mushroom-trees still stood.

I was determined to learn the dragon's way with writing. There could be a point where I would need it.

A thudding of footfalls broke my concentration and Cyril walked in grumpily, helping Myst along.

"She awoke and asked me to take her to you and, being the apparent hand-servant I seem to be considered here, I brought her here."

I sighed and trotted over, resting a wing on Myst's shoulders so she could navigate.

Cyril walked away in a huff, as usual. He didn't approve of Myst, lowering my opinion of him even more. As far as I can fathom, in the old days dragons with disabilities had servants to help, and he felt he was assuming the role of one by helping the blind Myst.

I sat down, Myst sitting beside me.

"You should ignore him," I sighed, looking at her, "He's just irritable about getting his claws dusty."

Myst didn't seem to notice, she was crying a little, tears spilling from her off-white eyes. "Cynderâ€| I woke up today! The sun woke me up!"

â€|What was that supposed to mean? "Uhâ€| What?"

"Cyn!" She was sobbing now, slipping her forepaws around my shoulders and pressing her head to my neck, "â€|The light woke me up!"

"What's wro-?" my eyes widened, blinking several times, "-oh!"

I closed my eyes, and then opened them. They were getting wet yet again.

I didn't care.

I wrapped myself around Myst, wings all but engulfing everything but her head on my shoulder and her tail twitching back and forth, peeking from under one wing. I pressed my cheek to her forehead, not caring that one of her tiny, blunt back-blades pressed into my cheek.

I heard Ignitus get up and leave, but was all but oblivious to it.

"It's working," Myst's tears of joy fell to my shoulder, creating tiny streaks of dampness, just as mine were upon her head, "It's really working!"

Warmth budded in my chest, sweet relief flooding my veins. I was crying shamelessly, staining my obsidian cheeks.

My baby would see again!

!

Her wings were wrapped all around me, her cheek warm and comforting on my forehead! Like mom, she felt like mom had. My paws didn't feel the hard points of back-blades on her back like mom had, and she was so much smaller.

But the warmth was the same, the beautiful, comforting warmth. It flowed from her, her familiar smell wrapping around me like a blanket, like home!

She was home to me, the only home I knew any more. Not this cold, stone place I couldn't even see. No matter how many times she described it to me, it didn't seem beautiful; nothing compared to the island that was probably now naught but a burned scar on the land.

I miss it; when the blue sea mirrored the starry sky at night and the reflected dots of light skimmed and danced like fireflies in the tide. Where the wind carried the whispers of the sea to sing us to sleep, the leaves of ivy dancing that'd tickle your tail be it to close to the cave opening. Friends, their parents, elders!

I hadn't really believed they could be gone until my parents were too! I never took death seriously before that. The sea kept us safe, sung us to sleep. When I was little I'd thought nothing bad could reach over the water to grasp us, not even death. I was being naïve, and any belief I had in a safe haven had been torn from me by fiery claws!

It was gone, all of it, and I pushed it away and tried to lock it away in the back of my mind as I'd been forced to learn to. It was the only way I could cope.

When had my tears turned to those of pain rather than joy?

My past still haunts me, all of me; my body by scars, my sight and soul with the seemingly eternal blackness! It was all nothing but dark. There were two shades of dark now, a barely perceptible difference when I looked towards the light.

I moved my head to look at Cynder, a slightly darker blob in an only barely perceptible shade of lighter dark. "Cynâ€|"

We drew slightly apart, and the warm strength of her paw rested on my shoulder, "Why are you sad?"

She could tell. In the short time I'd known her I hadn't been able to hide a thing.

"Cynâ€| The scarsâ€| Do they stay forever?"

A sigh, wind from her exhale playing across my face, "Yes, Myst. If there's one thing I've learned about scars, it's that they never fade. They stay the same size forever."

I looked down. Must be one of our shadows because it's the darker shade of blackâ€|

The paw slipped off my shoulder, brushing to my chin and lifting it. There were two spots of the lighter dark on Cynder, lighter than anything elseâ€| Her eyes?

"But you know what? Scars don't grow either, but guess what does grow?"

I just blinked. Another barely perceptible sheen under the other spotsâ€| Was she grinning?

"â€|What?"

Her paw moved again, my head staying straight without the support, and pressed to my chest, where my heart beat deep in my chest.

"We do."

(A/N

First of all, there's a new Legend of Cynder out! A spin-off crossover from right after this chapter, I suggest taking a look if you like this. It involves dumping Cyn in the KH-verse, and even if you aren't knowledgeable in Kingdom Hearts, neither is she! So she's even more confused than you are and if I do my job right, it should be explained to you as it is to her. And if you are a KH fan I think you might enjoy seeing how the characters react to herâ€| She and Riku have particularly low opinions of each other, funny because they're two of my three favourite videogame characters of all time. So feel free to go check it out!

Secondly, this pov change came as a surprise to me more than anyone, I wasn't expecting it until Myst all but tackled me with the idea. Myst probably isn't going to have lot from her point of view, but if you like it, tell me and I'll certainly think about adding more.

Ooh dear, there I go with the author-note length again, by!

5. LOGIC OR LACK THEREOF

A wicked grin spread over my mouth; the blood that coated my teeth

was cold and hard.

The little thing must have thought I'd been her dear daddy returning from his scouting mission. How ironic, really, that it'd be the little one, who they sought beyond all else to protect, to cause their own harsh deathsâ€|

I'd known there was one family left; I'd found the records in the remains of the temple. At the time I was relatively new, only three years of training. If I wanted The Master to notice me I had to do my job well.

I stretched my huge form, leaving great rakes in the ground from my huge talons.

I don't know how I got this big, and I really don't care. I have the power I need thanks to the Master, and that's what matters.

But why do I need power? To maim and kill? My eyes softened, and I looked towards a scar on my left foreleg. I probably deserved itâ€|

I snorted, releasing a cloud of thick smoke, shaking the alien thought away. Of course I deserved it, proof I had witnessed great hardship, and beaten it! I spread my great wings, the light through them making the ground gleam like fresh blood. A single powerful beat and I was soaring, power rushing through me as I circled once, twice, a third time.

"Best pray to your dear ancestors I don't take my sweet time tearing you all to shredsâ€|" I whispered, before turning and shooting into the blue sky, a speeding comet of shadow-fire against the bright blue.

â€|

"Noâ€|" Shaking, eyes squeezed shut. "I'm not me!"

Not caring how little sense that made, I shook, rolling over, claws swishing through the air frantically, slashing at shadows I thought were there. "Leave me alone!"

Pressure on my shoulder, and I blindly swiped at it, scratching but not drawing blood.

"Ow! Crap, Spyro, wake up_!" A blow to the head and my eyes blinked open.

"Finally! I thought you'd stay like that forever, you great oaf," Cynder's voice was gentle, teasing.

I grumbled, shakily pulling myself to a sitting position. "Well, you ever tried waking yourself up before?"

She shrugged, "Never had to. Haven't had a nightmare, ever."

I blinked, "Never? Not even of fighting?"

She shrugged, sighing, then chuckled sardonically, "Not while I'm asleep, at least. Can't say the same about the waking hours thoughâ€|

Guess it'd be the same with any fighterâ€|"

She paced to the window in my room, the moonlight making her sparkle all over; diamonds in the night. "We need to figure out these nightmares of yours. It's the third time this week I know of. And I only know about them when I hear you yelling from my room."

I glanced down at the floor, "Sorry I woke youâ€|"

"It's fine," she looked up at the twin moons, a shiver passing through her, "Something's coming, and I highly doubt it's good. I feel useless, sticking around here."

I sighed, "You're far from useless at any point in time."

She snorted, "And you're far from evil."

Great. This again. "Those two don't even relate."

She smirked, "They're related if I say they're related."

"Your logic is beyond me."

She laughed, "I thought we'd already established that my logic doesn't exist."

I sighed, the ghost of a smile gracing my muzzle, "I think your impaired logic doesn't affect your ability to easily change the subject at any point in time."

"What can I say? It's a skill!" was the sarcastic reply, "Anyway, point. You stop thinking his crimes are yours, and I'll see what I can do about calling myself useless."

She plopped down into a sitting position, tail curled around her forepaws, eyes sparkling with determined mischief.

I sighed, "You're not moving until I say yes, are you?"

"Not an inch."

"Fine, I'm not evil, you're not useless," I grumbled, "Now, go on, get outta here."

"I'm not convinced, but I'll bother you more about that at a later date," she sprung to her feet, shot me a triumphant smirk, and headed for the door.

"I don't doubt that."

6. DARK PULSES

"Come on, Spyro!" I nodded at the statue room, "You need to get out more often!"

"This isn't really getting outâ€|" he grumbled.

"Ri-right, am I supposed to be glad we're spending the day in the creepy statue room?" Sparx quipped, crossing his arms agitatedly. "I

need new friends."

"Myst's with Terrador getting her progress checked, and I'm bored. I need to get my elements back and purple-boy here knows how to operate the arena."

"I don't knowâ€| I've never done it myself beforeâ€|"

I grinned, snorting, "What's the worst that could happen?"

Sparx snorted, making a point to stay as far away from Spyro as possible, "Girl, don't 'worst that could happen' us. It's _us! The worst ALWAYS happens to us!"

Spyro frowned, "Lantern-boy has a point."

"Hey! I resent that," Sparx grumbled.

I sighed, "Spyro, c'mon! Do you really want me to not have elements were something to happen? What if the temple was attacked? If nothing else, I need to brush up on my close-combat!"

He sighed uncertainly, "I guessâ€|"

We stepped out under the shadow of the great gold statue, Sparx quickly fluttering away from the arena, "I dunno what you're planning, but I'll be over here, as far from it as possible!"

Ignoring that, I trotted briskly to the wall and hit the lever that lowered the statue. It sank and was seamlessly covered, as always. "So, how do you work this thing?"

"I have a bad feeling about thisâ€|"

"You have bad feelings about everything! Just tell me!"

He sighed, shaking his head, "It's simple, really. All you have to do is stand outside the circle, and whatever you think of will appear inside the circle."

He closed his eyes for a minute, concentrating. With a poof, a dummy materialized inside, this one inanimate.

I grinned, pacing up to it. Lowering my head I tried to feel the warmth in my belly, spreading through my veins. For an instant it was there, but as I tried to spit it out, it faded faster than an illusion. A plume of smoke, but naught else, wafted from my mouth, rising harmlessly past the dummy's face.

"Dammit!" I tried again, eyes narrowed in vexation. Again and again I tried, and again and again I failed.

I growled to myself, "Nothingâ€|"

"Heh," Sparx floated over, "You got that riâ€", he was cut off by my glare, and returned to his previous position.

I do not make a fool of myself in front of him.

Irritation bubbled in my stomach, and familiar heat blossomed inside me. Smiling, I opened my mouth, confidently letting loose a torrent of flames that neatly incinerated the dummy.

"I did it!" I all but cheered, smirking at the pile of ashes as it vanished from the floor.

I jumped, getting strange looks that reminded me I was with others. Heat blossomed on my cheeks, hidden by black scales.

Spyro laughed quietly, "Only a matter of time."

I puffed out a tiny flame, just because I could, and grinned, "Gimme something more challenging!"

â€|

That's when the stone began to burn. Pain lanced through my body, and I looked dazedly to Cynder. Memories flooded through me, and anger I'd long abandoned flared to life.

"Why don't you try this one?" My voice was haughty, lower than it should be; alien.

Light blossomed in the arena, expanding to become a huge, dark form. The first thing to form was a blinding, poisonous green shine from a crystal eye.

"Noâ€|" I backed up, alien anger evaporating. Fear crept over me, burrowing into my veins and flooding my whole body. I was shaking like a mouse under a cat's keen glare, weakerâ€|so weakâ€|

"Traitorâ€|" The voice hissed, and Gaul's gargantuan sword lanced towards me, too shaken to move.

"No!" Cynder crouched, throwing herself at the flat of the blade, unbalancing it enough that, with a swish and a thud, it buried itself in the stone next to me, leaving a great rift buried in the rock â€" barely half a foot from where I crouched.

"Make it leave," She growled, dodging a sword-slash.

"I- I can't!" I couldn't; I tried to make it vanish, but it refused to fade into nothing.

â€|

I shot foreword, crouched, and tried to lance out with more flame, but once more the heat was gone, abandoning me.

"Shit! Not again!" Pressure exploded against my side, and I was sent flying with an almighty crash into the wall.

I stood shakily, dizzily noticing Spyro trying to dodge sword-strike after sword-strike. He was still clumsy and disoriented in his new body, only coming out of it when training. But his eyes were wide and fearful; he didn't stand a chance.

"Hurry, Cynder, you don't have time!" Sparx yelped from somewhere by

the ceiling. I crouched, snarling. I was slipping down, blackness creeping around me as I was enveloped by my own shadow.

Still, I wasn't afraid. I raced forward through shadow before exploding upward, bursting from the darkness, into light.

Power whirled around my forepaws, guiding them as I whipped them down, and wind followed, slamming into the great ape, knocking him backward, winded.

I landed and finally took in what I was seeing. A great ape as big as a guardian stood there, only one eye remaining, a great, tainted spirit gem resting in the other socket, glimmering like frozen venom. The skin around the eye was rotted, stinking flesh, the air around us heavy with the thick stench.

It curdled in the air; I could barely breathe, stomach lurching.

"I'm not your puppet anymore!" Spyro, seemingly having found his confidence, launched himself forward, talons glowing green with venom. They slashed through the huge ape's neck and his body dissolved into nothing, taking the stench with him.

I sank to my forepaws, panting. The darkness that had shrouded the ape seemed to have carried on, suffocating me. The others couldn't see it. It was slowly strangling me, and I collapsed into dizzying darknessâ€|

7. PUREST SHADOW

Where am I?

I blinked open eyes, stinging. I was on a great platform, surrounded by darkness. A huge black gemstone in the middle gleamed faintly, but that was the only light.

"Cynder." I whipped my head around, growling as a slight patch of darker black paced forward.

"At ease, little one, it's only me."

My mouth shut with a click; two green eyes looking at me.

"It's been nearly a monthâ€|" My voice was almost plaintive; I'd missed my strange guardian more than I care to admit.

She sighed, "I am sorry, Cynder, there is much I need to accomplish and little time to do it. Certain events have been causing my power to wane, and it'll be some time before I can contact you again."

"Ohâ€|" I glanced at my forepaws, unsure of how to respond, "I guess all the insanity's far from over, huh?"

"Unfortunately, you're right. It won't be long before things go crazy for you, as well."

I sighed, "Joyâ€|"

She smiled, "But, little one, don't you have a question to ask me?"

"I've tried that before, it never really works," I grumbled sardonically.

"I wish I could answer all your questions. Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to."

I blinked, "You're a frickin' all-powerful, ancestor-spirit thingy, and you still have a boss?"

She laughed so hard tears trickled from her eyes, shaking her head and grinning, "I guess that's one way of putting it. But at least today I come bearing a few answers."

"How unusual," was my dry reply.

"I apologize for that. I wish with all my heart and soul to help you any way I canâ€| But I'm here today, partly, to admit to failureâ€| Her head drooped, long neck dipping like a swan's.

I snorted, smiling despite myself, "I know you, maybe not as well as I wish I did, but you'd never admit defeat unless there's no other way."

"Oh, I don't know," the ends of her mouth rose, a gentle smile, "are you so sure you're talking about meâ€"and not yourself?"

"Yes, I'm sure. You're smart enough to give when you have to. I'm so not."

She laughed quietly, shaking her head, "That is one of the largest lessons of warâ€"no, of life. And something I don't doubt you will eventually be forced to except. Now, I was trying to explain something."

I gave her a sheepish smirk and plopped to my butt, giving a little overdramatic bow, "Yes, almighty teacher."

Kaboa just shook her head, sighing, "Did you ever wonder why you've never had nightmares?"

I shrugged, "Not reallyâ€| I don't usually dream much."

"I placed a spell safeguarding you when you were young. Dragons with a purple's power tend to have visions easilyâ€"it can fracture a young child's mind before they're ready for them. I was hoping it would hold for awhile yet. However, something went wrong with the arena. It shouldn't have anywhere near enough power to have called forth that monstrosity." Her eyes hardened dangerously, making even me flinch inside.

"What do you have against that thing?"

Her eyes were burning emerald fire, "Let's just say we've had an encounter in the pastâ€"and I cannot forgive the repercussions of it. Not now, not ever."

Her body was rigid, her eyes hard, and even I was smart enough not to push it. "So, what does the safeguard have to do with MonstroApe XL?"

"Everything. He's still around nowâ€"and his consciousness flitted into that ancestor's-damned doll. I have my suspicions about how the arena was sabotaged, but that doesn't matter to you yet. All the concentrated darkness from where he is exploded to the arena with himâ€"and crashed full-force into my barrier."

Her eyes were bitter, "He has much more power than I do, and of course my barrier gave way. You must be wary of the darkness. While your power is a great gift, it is a curse as well. Darkness is not evil in itself, but it's been tainted by the Dark Master's power."

I just blinkedâ€"there was so much to take in, but then my mind snapped to one aspect. "Hey, wait! If you had an argument with roteye before you diedâ€"you're not an ancient spirit! Just how long ago did you live?"

I had all the subtlety of Steam, but I was numb, confused and even a little afraid. What if the tainted darkness overcame me like it had Spyro? This didn't seem like something you could blast away and fight.

She sighed, "I will explain everything when the time is right. For now, I have an element to teach. Your true element."

She smiled. "Shadow and wind are like no other elements, and I can only teach you the one I know. They both do not drain much strength from you directly, but rather alter the world around you to suit your needs. A good dragon's shadowbreath is pure darknessâ€"any negative taint filtered out."

A chill on the wind, and Kaboa was covered in shadowâ€"not writhing like the General had been, but warm and safe, like a blanket of dark on a sleeping earth. Her eyes were normal, like twin emerald moons, her silver underbelly glimmering like starlight.

A minute later and everything was gone, leaving only darkness.

Seconds passed in darknessâ€"and then she returned, slipping from the shadows, catlike.

"Pure darkness is something rare and powerful, not to be overestimated. Disguising yourself in shadow takes barely any elemental energyâ€"it's what you did earlier when you slipped into the ground. Are you ready to learn? It should offer some resistance from the taint."

I nodded, "I guess I can deal with more school."

"First, you must understandâ€"this is a dream; I have not the power to bond it to reality so that unlocking your power here will hold true to reality. You can probably still slip into shadow, but using it offensively will be beyond you until you regain at least one element."

I nodded, and she gestured towards the obsidian gem, "Stand there, and open yourself."

The black, glassy stone was cold and smooth under my paws.

"Okay," Kaboa's voice seemed distant, "Shadow is an ability unlike any otherâ€"possibly the rarest elementâ€"the pure darkness grants us sleep, rests our eyes from the harsh sunlight, and somehow still promises that dawn will comeâ€| There is a reason hopelillies grow naught but in the deepest, purest darkness. Hope is strongest when the danger is so terrifyingly real."

Drifting in darkness, almost asleepâ€| Power was flowing around me, flowing through me like waterâ€|

I half expected a voice besides Kaboa to whisperâ€"but none came. Eyes blinked open as shadow gathered around me, twirling around me like something alive. For an instant I was confusedâ€"it wasn't exploding, shocking everything in the vicinity, or any other kind of overpowered blast.

"Cynder, a shadow fury is different. You have the raw materialâ€"now you have to shape what it'll become yourself."

I thought for a moment, before grinning. Closing my eyes, I channeled the shadow, hardening it into something substantial. The whispering shadows blazed around my forepaws and tailblade like black flame, edges becoming sharper than razors.

I examined one, stepped forward, and brought it down on stone, paw becoming shadow as the sharpened claws sliced through the stone like it was little more than moist soil.

Eyes wide, I smiled. "I guess I could get used to this."

8. ROLES REVERSED

Kaboa flashed yet another smile, "You never cease to amaze, little one."

She gestured with her tail, and in the endless abyss of black, sprinkles of light solidified into great stepping stones. "Those will lead you to the next arena. I will instruct you from here; I have limited energy right now."

I looked at her, concerned, "Will you be alright?"

She laughed, "I'm already dead, little one, but you won't be seeing me as oftenâ€"the barrier lent me strength, and now that it's gone, it's harder for me to reach you. If it weren't for the hopelily pendant I couldn't reach you at all; please keep it safe."

I nodded, flinching, yet feeling a little bitter. More things about myself I didn't know. I'd been eating away at the temple library in order to find out about my raceâ€"but I kept learning this and that about the war. The only one who even seemed to want to tell me was Kaboa. Yet of-freakin'-course someone or something would be able to control her.

How the hell does a ghost have a boss? Who is it? Who the hell is mat-fur? How the hell do I have a purple's power?

I found I couldn't fly in this strange worldâ€"only glide. Fan-freaking-tastic. I spread my wings, darting from platform to platform.

The more I learn about myself, the less I understandâ€|

The same holds true for the war. I fight tooth and clawâ€"literallyâ€"for a cause I don't know enough about. All I have is how obviously wrong the things I've seen really areâ€"and that I trust those instructing me with all my heart and soul.

The next platform loomed, the edges lined with large statues vaguely resembling the soldiers of Dante's Freezer. I eyed them carefully. A chill was emitting from themâ€"colder than ice, creeping up my spine. Like being watched.

I looked at the statues; if this was an arenaâ€| I flung myself forward and slashed through with my extended claws, grinning as it collapsed into rubble.

"Hell yes!"

War? Terrible. Killing animate objects that can't feel pain or think? Fun as all heck.

I sliced through at least fifty of the things, Kaboa instructing me on other techniques. Slipping into the ground and exploding out; blasting darkness around me; shooting black smoke; turning the area midnight black. This had the most options of any element I'd tried so far, the most effects by creativity. It brought a calm and clarity to battle even beyond the earth element. I didn't wonder much about the lack of a voiceâ€"maybe it was because it was my natural element.

A swish of black, and the last statue was sliced cleanly in half.

More platforms, more techniques; it passed in a blur. Thinking back, I couldn't tell you what was happening at any given time. A dream is a secret place within, where the most fleeting of fancies can alter the course of its world. It began to fade, losing its grip on reality, slipping into night.

"Goodbye, little one, may your true dreams be pleasantâ€|"

And then I faded into true sleep.

And thus began my first true dreamâ€|

Laughing, always the laughing. Small, beak-like nose scrunched in defiance, I growled, "I can fly! Just wait and see!"

The red oneâ€"Ronnoh, I think it wasâ€"just laughed.

"There is no way in all hell something as fucking big as you can fly!" He flitted around, smirking.

Straining, flapping down; I had no idea what I was doing, and it

showed.

The red dragonfly and his companions just laughed, small faces contorted with sneers.

"What can you do?" he laughed, "You can't even get off the ground! What are those wings for? All you do is suck up all our time and energy! You think we want to spend hours weaving nets to catch your fish, you damn freakin' bit of blubber?"

With a cry of defiance, I beat my wings to the hard, cold air, sharp teeth glinting.

That was the first time I'd ever heard swearing or cursing._

"You leave her alone!" A golden blur and the slap of a small fist. Ronnoh fell at my feet, dazed, and I looked down at him, eyes wide and confused. My teethâ€"sharp and pearlyâ€"each half the size of his arm, gleamed in the purple glow from spilt mushroom-sap.

Fear covered his faceâ€"at the time I didn't know why. I didn't realize that, if I chose to, I could snap him in half; didn't realize that taking another's life, their right to the world, was even possible.

Sparx, young, flitted down, laying one hand on my cheek. Ronnoh shook there, too terrified to even think about flying away.

Minutes passed, Sparx hovering by my side, as slowly I remembered.

I wasn't six, I didn't live in the swamp anymoreâ€!

I knew how to take a life and what it meantâ€!

"I can soar higher than you ever could without leaving the ground," I smirked, "And I use more than hot airâ€|most of the time."

I turned, swishing my tail over his head, unintentionally making him twitch. As the swamp faded into the background, and then nothing, I was left to laugh inwardly at how Sparx had once been my guardian, perhaps even more than I am now his.

There will always be those willing to torture those weaker than them-or unable to stop them- just because they can, I still don't understand why. But after everything, I've realized something more important.

Not reacting with fear or anger, but pity and defending those who need it is the greatest strength of all._

(Yupâ€| Sparx used to defend Cyn! That's what "big" (according to him) brothers are for! XD There will always be those who like to torture those weaker than them, or just unable to fight- in my opinion true strength is the ability to feel sorry for anyone- and do your best not to let anger cloud your mind. People who flaunt things like that aren't worth crying for, and being able to ignore and not be angered by it is one of the greatest strength of all, though I think that there are others, it's certainly up there. A little bit of my teenage philosophy for you. XD)

9. A MATTER OF TIME

"She's smiling?"

"Yeahâ€| And it was like she was laughing a minute agoâ€|"

"Tainted darkness knocked her out, she should not be having good dreams. It's impossibleâ€|"

Myst? Spyro?

I felt a small paw on my shoulder. "Cyn once told me impossible is completely objective. And that she was the living proof."

Spyro snorted, and I could just imagine him shaking his head, "She would say that, wouldn't she?"

I smirked slightly, careful to keep breathing steadily, "Yes, I certainly would." My throat felt like all I'd eaten in months was chips of burning, sharp rock.

Sighing, I stumbled into a sad, slumped attempt at a sitting positionâ€"everything hurt, aching like cold flame. My stomach growled, insisting on food, my limbs and wings felt like they'd been through the machinery at Munitions Forge, and I could feel a migraine coming on.

Great.

"Myst, go get Terrador or Ignitus," Spyro's voice was deceptiveâ€"masked by a calm that both Myst and I knew wasn't actually there.

I reserve my opinion that Spyro hasn't had the time to learn much common sense. At least not in emergenciesâ€"sending the semi-blind dragon to find certain guardians when she couldn't see color yet? Really?

Myst was already gone though, and I snorted, sending another pang down my sore body.

A cold paw rested on mine; I twitched, looking down, seeing Spyro slip my forepaw overâ€"pressing a toe-tip against the underside of my wrist. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Calm down, I'm just checking your pulse."

I snorted, "I'm fine; I just fainted. Embarrassing as it is, I'm completely fine."

My answer was only a snort and a groan, "Cynder. You've been unconscious for over two weeks."

The smart comment I was preparing died in my throat, "Holy crap."

"Do I hear swearing?" A golden head peeked in from the doorway, "That's certainly not purple boy! Cyn!"

A gold blur rushed over, wrapping small arms around my nose, "Don't you never, never do that to me again! You scarâ€"er, left me all alone with the idiotic purple terror there!"

I snorted, coughing when cold air met my lungs, "Double negative, idiot."

Warmth budded in my heart; he was still here, all I had left from the swampâ€|

He couldn't help but chuckle, relief flooding over his diminutive features. A joking punch to the snout followed, "You never change, do you?"

Shaking my head, I smiled, "Nor do I plan to."

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Ignitus rushed into the room, footsteps hitting stone with reverberating clangs.

I barely suppressed a gasp. The guardian looked like he'd aged a decade or two. The end of his tail-tip brushed the ground, and dark circles ringed beneath his eyes. "Cyn, you're awake."

It looked like the weight of the world lifted from the red's shoulders.

â€|

"Well, you know more about medical things than I do," I turned from Cynder, pacing out the door, "I'll leave you in peace."

This is all my fault; I'm a walking, talking liability.

As long as that crystal stays, I'm putting everything and everyone I care about in danger.

If I could reach it at that moment, I would probably have torn it out there and thenâ€"regardless of what that'd do to me.

But then again, probably notâ€| I'm not ready to die yet.

I need to leaveâ€|

I couldn't bring myself toâ€| I'm responsible for Cynder being exposed to the taintâ€| It was him or Gaulâ€| Someone had latched onto the crystal.

She's still in dangerâ€| I don't know how she was in convexity without it taking hold, but whatever it was, it's gone now.

Because of me. Who knows what the darkness leeching from that ancestor's foresworn rock could do nowâ€|

Cynder may be awake, but there's still the chance something will go wrong, especially when she's weakened.

I know the taint better than anyone hereâ€| If something did happen, I might be the only one who could do anythingâ€|

At least until she regained her strength, I had to stay, just to be sureâ€¦

Maybe it's a pitiful excuse. The likelihood of something happening is tiny; Cynder is the most strong-willed person I've ever met.

I promised myself then and there that when she was better, when she could fight again, I would goâ€"remove one threat at leastâ€¦

I plodded onto the great balcony, staring up to where two moons crept closer to each other every night. They always drew my eyes, and always that sense of dread burrowed to my heart.

I didn't know what or when, but something crept closer as the days passed, and I was so afraidâ€¦

10. SHUT UP AND LISTEN

Time passed in its fickle way; the nightmares worsened. Glimpses of a peek glowing ominous green, of the moons set to blot each other from the starless sky, a great collapse, and spectral, rotting green forms in the darkâ€¦ A small form bathed in shadow, a great tree surrounded by ethereal mist, sending shivers up my spine.

The dreams always ended the same wayâ€"a small, white form staring out to the moons, tears like diamonds, and the wail of a broken heart.

For a dragon that had never had a natural dream before, the haunting images wavering eternally on the edge of my consciousness caused a great deal of sleep loss.

Still, my legs steadily strengthened, my tail no longer dragged. Any evidence the darkness had touched me was dissipating like smoke, leaving only a haunting edge of unease to remind me it remained.

I was stirred from another nightmare by Sparx; so restless that even the weight of him laying himself on my nose forced me out of the nightmare.

"Sparx, why were you up?"

"Just, erâ€"enjoying the view! Look outside, it's beautiful!"

I cocked one eyebrow.

"Oh okay, I was just celebrating!" I didn't like that look one bit.

"Celebrating _what_ exactly?"

Sparx flinched at the steel in my voice, "Eh, not much. Gonna enjoy tonight now the violent, purple sociopath is gone."

I jolted and stood up, careful not to wake Myst. "Sparx, you better not be joking. Explain. Now."

"I dunno! I was up enjoying the fresh air; haven't been able to sleep

with turn-scale around. 'Course, that's when I saw him! Packing up like he was making to leave! Didn't wanna talk to him myself, I'd rather not get eaten this young!"

I growled, "For someone so young, you're awfully senile. Come on, we'll go find out what's happening."

"Why is it always this way with you! Break the rules, ignore the little dragonflyâ€"who, by the way, seems to be the only sensible one in the placeâ€"go out where it's dan-!"

"Sparx," I cut him off, voice sharper than steel.

"Oh, alright." He could sense the harsh tint that he never heard unless I was truly serious.

"Where did he go?"

â€|

I stepped into the garden, relishing the cool breeze caressing my worn scales. Little comfort that it was, at least it was some distraction for what I was about to do.

I shouldn't feel like a traitor leaving; I'm leaving to protect everyone. Yet I know what their reactions would beâ€| Sparx's suspicion, Cynder's anger, Myst wondering if there was something more she could doâ€|

"Get it together," I muttered to myself, "you're doing it for themâ€|"

Squaring my shoulders, I paced forward, proudly slashing a pair of frogweed to shreds. I promised myself before; I wouldn't let my guilt affect my better judgement and more. It was the reason I'd left, and if I had to kill, I needed to accept that. I'd come too far to turn back now.

I continued on, slashing barricades and frogweed that blocked the path. The mushroom canopy was thick, and I thought it best to take off further from the temple, less likely to be seen. Cynder was often awake even this late, as new to well. She always woke me up when I was screaming in my sleep, chasing the nightmares away, at least for that night. She was there so quickly now, I could only assume she didn't sleep well herself. Dread hung in the air, and at night the twin moons almost brushed.

I stepped into a clearing, glancing up at the cloud-sodden sky. I had to be far enough by nowâ€|

"What. The. Hell. Do. You. Think. You're. Doing?" A voice cut through the darkness, not masking a definite undertone of anger.

I flinched. I had never heard her that mad before. I turned, eyes looking at the ground, "I, erâ€| I'm leaving, Cynderâ€|"

Emerald eyes caught ahold of mine like magnets, glaring, "Why? And this better be pretty damn impressive, Spyroâ€|"

I tore my amethyst orbs from her leaf-green pair, "I can't stay, not

after everything I've done, everything I could do!"

"Spyro, shut up and listen. I could kill one of the guardians," she snapped, "just waltz up and slash out a throat. Anyone they trusted could if they had the speed for it. That doesn't condemn me or anyone- for it being something I'm capable of."

"It's different with me!"

"How!" Her voice barely hid thunder.

"You don't understand!"

"What don't I understand? Ever since the crap with flab-fur, you've been being weird!"

"Exactly," I was shocked to find my voice growing angry, "that was the gem! It caused the arena to go ballistic! It called that thing here! What if he overpowers me again?"

A flash of pain, and I blinked as my cheek burned. Raising a forepaw, I rubbed it, blinking. Had she really just slapped me?

"One. If he could control you, he sure as all heck would have done it by now; he could have us all dead in one night as we slept. Two. I defeated you when you were about twenty times the size you are nowâ€"and don't start on me not having elemental magic; I didn't the first part of that fight either. Third; do you realize how much effort we would put into finding you? That'd be more of a hindrance than help any way you look at it."

"Stop it, Cyn," Sparx murmured in her ear, "I liked where this was going!" He was caught by her glare and shut his mouth. Quickly.

That's when Cynder collapsed.

No warning, no reason, no dizzinessâ€"as far as I could tellâ€"only a click as scale and horn met the ground.

"Cynder!" I darted forward, pressing a paw to her neckâ€"breathing normal, if a little speedy. Pulse fine; her wing membranes were just a little warmer than the air, so no fever.

"Cyn!" Sparx darted forward, only to be blocked by my tailblade.

"Don't wake her upâ€"if she's sick or hurt, she shouldn't moveâ€"we both know that's not going to happen if she's awake."

A very irritated, glowing gnat glared at me, "Hurt her and I'llâ€!"

I barely hid a snort, "Like she said, if I wanted to hurt her I could'a done it many times over by now. Let me make sure she's okay."

The little bug grumbled, hovering a few feet away and glaring. After finishing, I sighed, "Far as I can tell, some sort of vision pulled her awayâ€"it's like she's dreaming, but she won't react to anything

in the physical realm. That can only mean something or someone is actively keeping her from waking up."

"Uh, yeah, I totally get it!"

I glanced at the clearly lost little dragonfly and sighed.

Why do I bother?...

11. FAMILIAR FLAME

I, like most, have things I dislike, often strongly.

Call them pet peeves if you willâ€!

Being ordered around by a disembodied old guy is certainly one of them.

Being called 'young dragon' by anyone who isn't Ignitus, Terrador or Kaboa is another.

Someone assuming I'm afraid is yet another.

So, when I awoke on a cold, stone platform hanging in the center of nowhere, called out "Hello, Kaboa?" and got some idiot, I wasn't thrilled.

"Do not be frightened, young dragon, you are not alone."

That sure as heck wasn't Kaboa.

"Who the heck are you and where is Kaboa?"

"I have summoned you here so that you might be warnedâ€! The celestial moons are counting down, and time is running out."

I thought of the moons creeping together, and how I always noticed; how they drew my gazeâ€! I shivered, and flinchedâ€"there was buzzing in the distance, yet I could see nothing as I whipped my head around, desperately searching for the source. Voices crept into existence, jarring through my body with all the subtlety of sledgehammers, clamoring and fighting like hatchlings to be heard. I shook my head, backing up as the cacophony of sound pounded through my being. Thank ancestors I was backing away from the edge, not towards it.

I was nothingâ€"feeble in the imposing power that was set to tear me apart and scatter the ashes.

It was coming from him; I don't know how I knew, but somehow I could feel where it originated fromâ€"and even that there was no malice behind the attack.

It pounded to my head, until finally I cracked, whimpering despite myself, "M-make it stopâ€!"

And the world was tainted blue.

Pieces of marble rubble that had been flipping and flying through the void slowed, tumbling slowly as if through thick syrup.

I looked around, feeling like I was moving through heavy air; it filled my lungs like mist, and was damp and cold against my black scales.

My eyes focused on the next platform; a spinning piece of thin column all that rested between this one and that. I found myself running forward despite myself. A rush of damp air, a streak of black scales, and I landed on the platform, dizzy as the world came back to some semblance of normality.

I sank to my belly, panting heavily until the worldâ€"if that's what this place wasâ€"stopped spinning. "What the hell was that?"

It took only a few minutes for the disembodied voice to answer, ignoring the irritation festering in my tone. "One with the power of a purple dragon can wield many abilities that others cannotâ€"including time itself. Learn to master this ability, and you will be able to slow the worldâ€"destroying enemies before they can even sense your movement. But, use this gift sparingly, only when circumstances demand."

"I'll use my powers how I wantâ€"and I sure as living heck am not listening to a disembodied voice."

"Be wary, young dragoness," the voice rumbled, "manipulation of time isn't to be used without the utmost care. The echoes of mistakes involving it can be most unpleasantâ€!"

"Fine, point. Now, who, or _what_, are you?"

I was answered only by silence, left to practice with more platforms and mutter uncomplimentary things under my breath.

I'd be lying if I said I'd rather he not heard the stream of insults.

The next platform of note held one of the glowing stonesâ€"this time redâ€"and I felt warm power buzzing through the air. Power I recognizedâ€"my own. I'd been so terrified I'd lost it, but here it was, swimming in the air, comforting as the embrace of a close friend.

I wasn't terribly tired, but the little ache that remained in my limbs was washed away, replaced by warm familiarity. I stepped forward, gazing into the warm, ruby glow of the gem.

"You seem to have abandoned your true calling. It is your destiny to harness the powers of the elements, yet you do not."

I sighed, "First, I don't do destiny. I make my _own_ path. Second, I'd love to; wanna show me how, you great oaf?"

I couldn't bring myself to yell, and what I said was a far-cry from what I had planned on saying, the serenity in the air here was too much for even me to taint with harsher words.

"Very well, step onto the jewel."

Should I trust this thing? I eyed the stone warily. I knew not to say

it lightlyâ€"but what could it hurt?

Famous last wordsâ€|

"Oh, what the hell," I stepped onto warm stone, heat resonating up through my paws and flowing, comforting, through my veins.

It was relaxing and I was almost drowsy, smiling slightly despite myself. Firelight emanated from the warm stone, casting an orange glow that turned my pink belly fiery red.

Clear your mind, Cynderâ€|

That wild voice! I'd heard it once before, resonating within my inner flame on the day I unleashed my first ever fury. It wasn't the same; as it had once been feral and hungry, now it was calm and almost somber, wise like nothing I'd ever known.

Feel the fire that runs through your veins, a raging inferno you've managed to tameâ€|

Allow its warmth to consume you, but never forget it has a will of its own. Do not lose yourself to its harsh, hungry nature.

A song from a distant memory, listen closely, let it rise within you, breathe with it.

The heat expanded until the ruby glow was coming from me, filtering through my veins, an explosion merely awaiting me to release it.

Now rise, young dragoness, and release the firestorm within you.

It was different this time. It wasn't a sweep of power that blasted me off my feetâ€"it was me, in control. I wasn't vibrating; I was dominating the power that blasted through my veins. Focusing it and channeling it to do exactly what I willed of it.

Wings beating, my body rose, pulsing with savage triumph as a ring of fire blanketed me, writhing like serpents until, with a last surge of will, I sent it outâ€"an inferno lapping hungrily at the air, cackling and hissing like a mad-thing.

I settled back to the stone, grinning as the ring of fire around me ate itself out of existence. The heat was there, constant and comforting as a heartbeat, real as the fire that had surrounded me but moments ago.

I lifted one paw, spitting a bit of fire into it just because I could. The heat blanketed my scales, and I couldn't help but grin. I gazed into the flickering sphere, the light soft and vibrant, like a friend, a red tinge covering my scales from the familiar aura.

I might not be back to how I once was yetâ€|

But I was well on the way.

I was coldâ€| Why was it so cold?

Shivering, I blinked open eyes, glancing around at faint, indistinct blobs of color.

"C-Cynder?" I squeaked, but I couldn't hear her breathing or see the familiar black and pink blob.

That's when the place erupted into chaos. Huge crashes reverberated throughout the temple, ringing through the ancient stone corridors like an earthquake. I backed into a corner, shaking.

Unlike most of the temple, this room's walls were made of white marble, I could just barely tell.

And so I pressed myself to the wall, placing my side that was less discolored to the outside.

There was little to do except try my best to be invisible, and pray.

Cynder, where are you?

â€|

"Well," the little gold dragonfly muttered. "That certainly doesn't sound goodâ€|"

"No, really?" I growled, eyeing bursts of flame from the temple as a roaring cacophony of explosions rent the night. "Want to be useful for once, and find out what's happening?"

"I am not leaving Cyn alone while you're here."

I sighed, tail swishing irritably, "That statement contradicts itself."

"Wellâ€| Uh, you contradict yourself!" The stress was getting to the little dragonfly, not even his comebacks were usually this feeble.

"And that makes even less sense." I blinked, staring into blackness; something was moving, great milky white, like a ghost in the gloom. Two forms scuttled forward, huge bulging bodies easily twice my size. Many legs pattered the ground, and they exchanged a clicking sound that seemed to jar through my very being. Eight bulbous, pussy black eyes glared at us.

"Ah, crudâ€|" I glanced at the sleeping form of Cynder, than back to the two forms, crouching into a fighting stance. "Why me?"

â€|

As soon as I was down again the old guy was at it. Again. I'm surrounded by idiots.

"Excellent, Cynder, you're a natural!"

"Was there ever any doubt?" I snarled sarcastically. I was really

sick of this guy not giving me any straight answers.

Ignoring me and my wisecracks, the aged voice continued, "But, now that a primal fire rages within you, show me that you have command of it!"

No. Hell_no. I plopped my butt to the ground, glaring into the emptiness. "No."

"Why not, Cynder?"

I grumbled, "I don't have anything to prove to you. I know what my abilities are, myself. And there's no reason for you to see them. I don't know you, hell, I don't even think I like you, so why don't you get. Out. Of. My. Head. Or wherever the heck we are right now." Me? Stubborn beyond reason? Probably. And I'm proud of it. "Pardon me for not liking random people in my head."

Several minutes passed in silence, the very air crackling with the ethereal thing's indignation. I raised a foot, drew my tongue over the pad and made a few good passes over my chest, removing a few last dashes of stone dust I'd picked up while scrambling over the floating pillar.

Finally, the bodiless voice cut through the silence. "Very well, little can bend your will."

"You got that right."

"Ah, the resilience of youth!"

Then I was on another platform, jumping at the sudden, seamless shift.

"Warn me next time!" I howled, glaring into emptiness.

No answer. Again.

I sighed, trotting up to the middle of the platforms where a pool rested, glowing iridescent blue. The air crackled with power, and I shivered, somehow reminded of the pool of visions. I stepped forward, looking into the blue, swirling pool.

Nothing happened except for the irritating voice to return, once more ignoring any time I tried to get a word in. "You have done well!" For the most part. And now it is almost time for you to return. But, be careful, Cynder, the enemy approaches!"

"Gods, at least tell me who you are. Not that I care, but I'd rather know who to complain about," I griped.

A sigh whispered on the wind, "You may know me as the Chronicler. Seek me out."

Something was tugging, pulling me into the pool until I couldn't see anything else. Slowly, particles drifted together, glinting like they were enclosed in hardened amber. A great, ethereal tree I'd seen many times before amidst a great lake of mist and gloom. Purple flowed like poison around the trunk, sending great chills up my spine.

I shuddered, backing away as soon as my mind was released from the foreign presence, shaking as the platform faded into black.

â€|

I blinked my eyes opened tiredly, yawning as something plowed into me, knocking the breath out of me as I was shaken from the last remnants of sleep, tumbling over onto my back.

"What the hell do you think you doing?" I screeched dazedly as I realized it was a certain purple form that had plowed me over, lying haphazard on top of me. I shoved him off and stumbled clumsily to my feet, a great, segmented leg stabbing into the ground where my head had been mere moments before.

Oh. That made more sense; swamp spiders, right. One of them must have tackled Spyro and he flew into me. I'd noticed that, if he had one fault when fighting, it was thinking his body was bigger and more powerful than it wasâ€"memories of the monster he used to be flowing thick in his blood.

Glaring at the one remaining spider, I trilled low in my throat and, with a cacophony of teeth-jarring clicks, it fled, oozing purple puss from several cuts along its bulbous form.

Turning my head, I glared at Spyro, eyes livid. "I can't even leave you alone for a minute." My cheeks were burning, disguised behind the black of my scalesâ€"thank ancestors.

He looked up slowly, eyes downcast and cheeks even redder than mine would be if they were lighter, apparently deeming his forepaws the most interesting thing in the world. "Uhâ€| Sorry?"

13. WRITTEN IN BLOOD

"â€"should have woken me up if you were in danger, you idiot! What the hell did you think you were doing? You know you're not strong enough to deal with those spiders!"

This had been going on for a couple of minutes; Spyro was staring at the ground as I continued to chew him out for being a moron.

"Uhâ€"not that I don't love you scaring the crap out of Violet here and everything, but I think you have other things to worry aboutâ€| " Sparx broke in timidly, hiding behind Spyro in fear of my rage.

I turned burning eyes on him. "Like what?"

He shivered in my glare, golden light wavering around him as he pointed one minuscule finger. "Like that."

After shooting him one of my patented 'if you're making a big deal out of nothing you'll wish you were never born' glares, I turned my head.

Rubble rumbled to hard earth, pillars of smoke burst into the dark sky and the air reverberated with the shrill, teeth-grinding sound of talons on armor.

My eyes widened, teeth gritting together, "Shit! How long has this been going on?"

"I dunno, but while you were catatonic the whole place went to hell," Sparx said matter-of-factly.

"Then you should have woken me up!" I crouched, stretching the wing I'd been lying upon ill-temperedly.

"Mr. Psychotic wouldn't let me!" He grumbled, glaring at Spyro.

I glared at the purple dragon who was staring sheepishly at his paws. "You die at dusk. On another note, let's go find Myst. Now."

I launched into the sky, Spyro taking only a moment to follow.

"Isn't it past dusk?" I barely heard Sparx mutter rhetorically to himself before he, too, followed.

I gasped despite myself, looking down in horror at the temple. Walls that had been a bit crumbly were now little more than mounds of rubbleâ€"stone dust floating on the air like ash, grey smoke billowing from several firesâ€"and I thanked any deity that might actually exist that there was little to burn.

"Ancestors, help us," I heard Spyro swear before tucking my wings to my side and diving at the still-intact roof where Myst should be.

"Cynder, stop!" Spyro cried desperately, "You'll kill yourself if you crash into that!" Claws glinted an inch from my tailblade as he tried to slow me down, but I was focusing on my descent, barely able to keep my eyes squinted open enough to see.

Come on, you can do this, I coaxed myself, willing black radiance to flow around me.

â€|

A flash of darkness surrounded Cynder, transforming her into a comet of black magic, shadows swirling around her in an inferno of power. They sunk into her scales, becoming one with her black form the minute she would have crashed into the roof. She sunk into it, diving through the thick stone like water.

"Now who's being idiotic?" I grumbled to myself, sighing. Drawing in a slow breath, I tucked my gold wings to my body, diving down and coming to a hard landing. Sparx followed me unwillingly, preferring the supposed likeliness of me eating him more than being alone in a siege.

I looked down from my perch on the wall in wonder as a certain red guardian strode forth through a chaotic mess of apes, slashing, blasting magic and knocking apes about like ragdolls.

As powerful as the guardian was, he couldn't do it all with basic fightingâ€"a great mass of apes surrounded him, crying murder to the moons. Gritting great teeth, the fire dragon drew into himself, a

great, blazing aura writhing around him. I shielded my eyes with one wing as the power condensed, shimmering like liquid sunlight before exploding in a symphony of crackling as blue-tinted flames burnt through matted fur.

Panting, the great guardian rose tiredly to legs that trembled slightly, and I flinched under his questioning look, leaving me no doubt he knew I had been somewhere I shouldn't. The disappointment in that look seared through me, and I looked down as his tired voice rang through the ancient halls.

"Get down here, young dragon." A swipe of a great tail, a crack as an ape slammed into the wall, falling and leaving naught but a bloodied stain creeping down the aged stone. "We need your help."

â€|

I managed to flip so I landed on my feet the second before I hit ground, the jolt jarring up my legs and shaking through my body in a pained flash. Gritting teeth, I rose to shaking legs, head whipping around frantically. No white form met my eyes; no one ran forth to greet me.

On the white marble wall, something was there, red and dripping. Terror shook me to my bones as I paced forward.

The wall was red with blood, manipulated into a message. It took me a moment to decipher the dripping script, shivering as the rusty scent of blood wafted through the room, a terrifyingly familiar scent.

'_Balcony._'

The dragon language was sloppy and misspelled, but it was just barely discernable.

"Dammit!" I swore, ripping out the door and through the hallway, barreling straight through a group of apes that had arranged an ambush.

They were lucky to live. A few got a scrape or two when one of my blades flashed by, but besides that, they survived. Living to shoot a few arrows at meâ€"a few ricocheting off the floor and walls inches from my paws or side.

I'm comingâ€| Please hold on, I'm comingâ€|

14. THE LITTLE DRAGON THAT COULD

I shrank back, flinching as the spearhead scraped my side, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Oh, 'ome on!" The ape growled, yanking the rope he'd wound around my neck, choking me until I coughed, throat burning like fire. I already had an array of new cuts crisscrossing over my body and, though the pain was nothing to what I had felt once before, it made every movement agony.

"Scream!" The ape growled, lashing the butt of his weapon to strike

my flank, teeth bared. "Make it so the black bitch can hear!"

I glared in the direction, hopefully into his eyes. "No."

I guess I was lucky the ape who'd caught me seemed to be mentally impaired. He'd dragged me here, arranging a sort of circle of black gems around the balcony that I really didn't like the look of. I didn't know what he was hoping to accomplish, but the shadowy aura of the things cast chills up my spine. I didn't want to see the things in actionâ€"that chill reminded me of the worst day of my life.

"Yer causing this yerself," The blob of matted fur and blood growled, jabbing the butt of his spear at my small body. "Yer lucky I'm not meant to kill 'ya!"

What would Cynder doâ€|?

"Well, good to know I don't have anything to worry about then, isn't it?" I tried to growl, I really didâ€"but all that came out was a small, strangled whine.

I'm not very good at thisâ€| Am I?

"Oh," the ape's mouth opened, looking at me, realizing what he'd let slip. "Iâ€|uhâ€|s'pose I co' kill ya' if ya' got really annoyin'â€|"

I forced myself to snort, which sounded an awful lot like a kitten with a bad chest cold.

The ape looked at me, scratching his chin with one hand, thinking aloud, "'ell, does't really matt'r if ya scream er notâ€| she'll comeâ€|"

The message, taken from my bloodâ€| If she found it alone she'd never wait to find someone to come with her. If there was only one ape, those stones must be pretty strong with whatever they did.

That's when the door slammed open and a pair of livid green eyes glared forth.

â€|

It never stopped.

Apes lunged and skittered past, hissing and prowling like cobras, ready to strike from anywhere. Drawing in breath, I released a great blast of lightning from my maw, hammering through the bodies of a mob of the things.

A duck from a slash of a sword, a dodge as the bolt from a crossbow hammered into the stone, ricocheting off, the shaft hitting me in the ankle.

The dance of battle went on and on, and there wasn't an end in sight.

No matter how many bodies I scattered to the ground, more climbed over, blood spraying up from the age-old stone and dyeing fur and scales crimson.

A flash was all I had for warning, another arrow shaft arching towards my chest. Gritting teeth, I slammed myself to the side, slipping in a pool of blood that could easily have been my own, and crashing to the hard ground. I had less than a second to force myself to my feet and blast an earth bomb at my past allies, wincing as I tried to move the wing I'd fallen on—"useless. I wasn't getting away with flying, that's for sure. Pain lanced through my side, stinging my body and almost bringing me to my knees more than once.

My side was drenched in red gore, dyeing my bright colors murky, sick shades that curdled my stomach.

I glanced around. I'd finished the current wave and for a moment there was peace. Shakily walking to the edge of the wall, I emptied my stomach over the barrier, flinching as the sharp tang of vomit scorched my tongue.

A shriek of rage, and something slammed upward, a great claw striking the earth as a familiar form met my eyes. A great, bat-like form, ridden by the form of a slick ape in purple armor. The dreadwing's pink, sickly eyes glaring like twin pale rubies while the rider brandished a glowing blade.

The Dreadwing's fur was disgusting before, but now I knew exactly where my unwanted food had ended up, and despite everything I felt the intense urge to fall into maniacal laughter.

Here stood one of Gaul's—"deputy to the master—"top servants and best assassins. And I had unknowingly emptied the contents of my stomach right over his head.

—

I stepped onto the balcony—"there she was, bruised and bloody, but alive. I glared at the single ape that had been holding her, eyes burning cold flame. Myst was calling, yelling something, but I couldn't hear.

That ape was going to die.

I didn't notice the shadows flashing around me as I paced forward with deadly intent, as smooth and lean as a great cat on the prowl.

Dark flames licked at my sides; cold.

I should have known something was wrong—"I hadn't called them there, and everything seemed eerily far away; surreal. I closed my eyes, pacing forward as the cold fire caressed my form.

That ape would die, the blood would flow over my paws, and I wouldn't need to worry anymore. At that point I wasn't even sure what I had worried about in the first place, but the flowing blood would do nicely to wash everything away.

I didn't know how long I stood there, basking in darkness, and I would have stayed forever had my side not exploded with pressure. I tumbled to the side, darkness evaporating from my form when I went through some barrier, stopping only when my body cracked painfully

against the small wall that bordered the balcony.

Eyes blinking open after a few pained minutes, I saw a little form batting dark stones into a pile as far away from me as possible, and the form of the ape, somehow tangled and trapped in his own rope.

While I had been trapped in the darkness, my baby hadn't only saved herself, but me as well.

And she had done it alone.

15. DEMONS OVERCOME

Something just snapped. I don't know what, but it had happened before â€| The last time resulted in biting off The General's toe. I glared at the ape, struggling to fight the rope that stung my neck, rubbing and stinging like mad. Cynder's body was growing unnaturally dark, shadows wrapping around her, unseeing eyes warping into pools of blinding light.

Something exploded within me, something I hadn't thought of for months. Eyes squinted; streamers of wind swam around me, combining into a winding serpent of power. I focused the all-but-invisible stir of air around the rope, jerking it from the ape's hands and loosening the lasso-esque knot.

The ape turned, gasping as I moved my paw, directing the wind-blast along with the rope, swirling into a tiny tornado around the ape. A jerk back of my paw, and it tightened, the whirlwind fading into oblivion.

Whipping around, I stumbled to a stop, eyes wide in horror.

Power whirled around Cynder, a swirling vortex of shadows, her eyes pits of glimmering ice, her blades glowing green with venomâ€"an element no pure dragon was meant to possess. She turned to me, glare haughty and unrecognizable, a feral light burning deep within.

It looked all too familiar.

â€|

I didn't have Cynder's reflexes. That was apparent from the multiple slash-marks that crisscrossed my flanks, crying crimson tears. My legs were shaky and unstable.

On the other hand, the Assassin was freshâ€"at least in one wayâ€|â€"and ready for battle. A purple mask rested on its head, and when I tried to shoot a glimmering ark of thunder, it arced off, leaving a circle of blackened, dry, scorched blood as sick-smelling steam wafted from the place it had struck, curdling my now empty stomach.

I forced myself to jerk to the side as a long wing-claw slammed into the stone beside me, fiery sparks exploding as it dragged against stone. The dreadwing's wing-claws were armed with long, steel spikes that left tiny fissures in solid stone and created a teeth-jarring shriek of metal against stone.

Dodging another swipeâ€"barelyâ€"I filtered power into my maw, releasing a glowing ball of toxin that, when dodged, left a sickly puddle of green on the stone.

Dodging a sparkling ball of red energy, I landed my forepaws in the puddle, getting poison over my paws and concentrating until it lengthened, solidifying into solid blades of venom, hard like steel.

Neither the assassin nor his mount was a fool. When they saw the deadly daggers spark into being, great wings fell like drumbeats, and the great bat shot into the sky.

Panting, wings shot out, eyes hardening, I beat down on the wind, shooting up as my wings cracked to the wind.

I couldn't take any more of this forced calm.

Adrenalin rushed through my veins as a low growl reverberated from deep within my chest. Something sparked to life I'd been trying to disguise and suppress since I'd been reborn.

Bloodlust.

I wanted this creature I used to control to die.

Thrusting forward paws that pulsed with green magic, I dived towards the great beast, eyes hard.

I'd had enough of pitying those who had turned my life into a living hell.

â€|

Those eyes reflected the eyes of another creature. A creature that haunted my nightmares. What Spyro had once been, those eyes were exactly the sameâ€"those bone-chilling, cavernous pits of nothing had stared at me and laughed as I lay bleeding, howling lament over my parent's bloodied corpses.

Fear crashed through me and I all but collapsed, shaking. I couldn't see anyone beyond this monster, as finally my vision strengthened, blurry edges becoming clear and strong.

This monstrous creature was the first thing I saw clearly, and in that instant I would have been happier blind.

I froze; she needed me and I just froze. I tried to speak, but all that could come out was a strangled sob. "Cynderâ€| Cynderâ€|" I didn't know I what I was saying, everything was just a hazy blur of old memories tainting reality.

I couldn't run, couldn't jerk my eyes from those pits. Memories shuddered into focus, a great form growling, pain lancing across my sides, the taste of fresh dragon's blood coating my tongue, and a deep laugh that took what little remained of my sanity and scattered it to the winds.

I cowered under those eyes, fear for myself, fear for my parents, and

most of all fear for the best friend I had ever known.

I looked up with eyes that gained a determined, protective glint that I knew she often had when looking at me.

And with a strangled cry of mental agony, I launched forward, darkness flickering against my scales as I crashed into the only family I had left.

16. TAINTED SHADOWS

My whole body burned; when I tried to stand, exhaustion brought me back down quickly.

"What happened?" My voice was cracked and dry and I didn't know why. My legs ached, and ghostly chills caressed my ebony scales, though the night was warm and moist.

Seeing me awake, Myst lost no time in tackling me. Her little form pressed to me, eyes wide and afraid, tear tracks sparkling down scarred cheeks.

"Shhh, shhh," I crooned, wings wrapping around her shoulders and tucking her into me, "It's okay, it's okay!"

Her sobs grew in volume, and I was at a loss. Turning my hard eyes upward, my piercing emerald gaze caught the ape's and held it, the hint of a snarl playing over my mouth. "What did you do to her?"

What the beast said then would haunt my nightmares.

Howling mirth, the ape howled to the dark heavens, "'Ah, that's rich! You shou' be askin' what you did to 'er!"

And with that, he lurched himself to the side, rolling haphazard off the side, tumbling to the earth below, evidently forgetting he couldn't catch himself while bound.

I looked helplessly at Myst, shivering in warm air, flinching at the sickening thud that meant the ape's reunion with the ground was harsher than expected.

"Myst," I was scared stiff, more than ever before, "what happened?"

â€|

Wind rushed around me as my claws clicked on the mask. Gritting teeth, I bunched my haunches, brought my back legs forward and raked through disgusting, matted fur, spraying blood. Kicking one last time and throwing myself back, I spiraled into a backwards flip, snapping wings out and catching the wind.

I whipped around the great bat, hopefully shooting an arch of lightning at its back, but it merely wrapped around, struck the mask, and thundered uselessly off. No making use of the dreadwing's weakness to electricity.

Trapped in an aerial dance of strike and counterstrike, blasting fire at random points and several close calls, I'd had enough.

I beat at the wind, fighting to gain altitude, turning in preparation to unleash another blaze of flame. A smoldering shot of red something crashed into my chest, burning like fire, knocking me back, forcing my wings to my side since they couldn't catch wind backwards.

Pressure exploded on my back and I yelped in agony as I crashed into a wall, hard enough to bring it crashing down beneath me.

Fire arching along my spine, I tiredly struggled to my paws, eyes mere slits. Power lurched in my gut, exploding outwards as my throat burned. Jaws widening, a great tirade of fire burst out, turning moist swamp air to steam as it raged forth. The dreadwing screamed, a flickering magic barrier bursting to life and struggling to bar the beast from the flame.

A final screech and the creature spun, great wings pounding the air as it shot away. Growling, golden wings snapped out, and I crouched, ready to spring after and finish the bloodbath I hadn't started. Anger burned within, and something stirred within, eyes narrowed as a pulse of purple burst forth.

Roaring in fury when the bat-like beast barrel-rolled to the sky, scattering ruby droplets from several wounds, and dodged the blast, arching out of shooting distance, I crouched. Snapping wings up, I readied myself to launch after the great beast, to end it if it was the last thing I did.

Faint wisps of shadow twined around my form, as in the distance the creature landed on a great mushroom-cap, turning light ruby eyes on me and baring teeth in a feral grin. It wanted me to follow.

And I was surprised to find I didn't care.

17. A TOUGH PILL TO SWALLOW

I have fainted, been dragged from my body into some bizarre dream world, tackled, shot, hit, apparently possessed, and tackled again in the last hour after getting barely any sleep for a week or two running.

I hate my life.

Myst fell asleep crying after telling me, and I couldn't bring myself to move and wake her. Even in her dreams she was trembling.

I would have given a lot to be able to fall into the oblivion of dreamless, thoughtless sleep for a day or two. Or five. Anything to forget things for a while.

I hadn't slept well since Kaboa's shield broke.

I felt strange, sort of fuzzy, and it was all I could do not to fall once more into nightmare-riddled sleep. I could barely move, but I had to stay awake. A siege was hardly an appropriate time for napping. I thanked every star that no more apes had shown up on the

balcony.

I was afraidâ€| So afraid. Of myself. Of what I could becomeâ€| I had thought I was strong enough to overcome this, and so I had battered it to the back of my mind.

But I'd lost myself so easily, and I was only starting to remember it now. The scariest part was that it hadn't felt wrong at allâ€"after a few moments, I'd been so lost to myself that didn't know it was wrong.

Laying my chin on my forepaws, a whispy sigh escaped.

Is that what it was like for Spyro?

Time passed, and at last a concerned Ignitus found us, worried eyes questioning.

Body aching, I sighed once more "story later, sleep now."

And I collapsed into my nightmares once more.

â€|

"Young dragon, remember who you want to be," a voice rumbled as heavy feet struck the ground with resonating thuds. It took me a moment to realize who it was, but when I did, I turned from my quarry and the small bits of shadow evaporated.

For a minute I stood there, confused, until violet eyes widened in realization. "Oh noâ€| I was about to lose it againâ€|"

I collapsed to my belly, tailblade clanging on the ground with the force of a judge's anvil.

The green guardian sighed, eyes weary. "You and Cynder have more forced to your shoulders than any young dragon should. Older dragons have fallen prey to the darkness much quicker. The resilience you've shown is extraordinary."

"What do I do?" I swiped an angry paw and sent a chunk of rubble spiraling across the blood-soaked stone, scattering ruby droplets. "I can't fight like this! Either my conscience makes it impossible, or I try to go without it and start turning into him."

"Young dragon," The green's voice was weary, yet powerful, "he is you."

I stared at the great guardian, eyes wide with betrayal. I couldn't make myself say a word. Then he continued.

"Alienating yourself from your past will not make the weight of it easier to bear. If you reject every bit of him you can, you reject part of yourself as well. Part you need."

"What?" My voice was angry, bitter, "You want me to be a monster so I can fight? A minute ago I was ready to fly after that thing and rip it into tiny, bloody shreds. You want me to be that?"

The guardian snorted, "Hardly. But tell meâ€"before the end, were you

fighting differently from anyone else? Different from Cynder? Life seeks out balance, and if you fight that fact it will only bring you pain. There's a bit of that 'monster' in all of us, and in times of war it's what allows us to fight and kill at all."

I felt helpless, angry, and afraid. The battle had worn away my nerves of losing my new friends, and for once I was talking without respect to the guardian. Claws scraping on stone, I growled, "You want me to use the monster I was to fight? What if I lose myself? What if I turn into him again?"

I was growling, holding back angry tearsâ€"barely. "I don't care what you say! He and I are not the same! I've changedâ€!" I trailed off when my voice choked.

The green dragon looked at me, aghast, "I never said you hadn't. But the fact remains that the General is a part of you, and the way you're denying it is making it worse. Find a line and don't cross it, but don't let him hinder you when your life is at stake."

Turning, the guardian sighed, looking back to me, "I suggest you rest and think. This battle is over, won or lost; now you must think of how you will fight the war."

He wasn't referring to the siege.

He trudged off and I glared at my forepaws, the slightest quiver in them vexing me to no end.

I don't want to fight. I don't want to feel this pain, or to cause it.

I want to be me, and more than anything, to stop being terrified about who 'me' isâ€!

(A/N I need to thank everyone for an incredible one-hundred reviews! You can ask anyone who sees me on a daily basis and they could tell you how much they mean to me! I have a resent for all you wonderful people and I hope you like it. I will be posting the link on the top of my profile as soon as I post this chapter! The reviews I receive always bring a smile to my face and I would be lying to say I haven't read them way too often. XD)

18. YOU CAME FIRST

Spyro had to help me move along, and I hated it. Even after absorbing a ridiculous amount of spirit gems, my body ached and my tail dragged on hard stone. According to Spyro, my real element fighting with the tainted shadow tore my magic apart from the inside out, running into my blood and weakening me.

He glanced at me leaning heavily on his steady, purple shoulder. His gold wing twitched, as if he were going to lower it over me, but then he looked away, amethyst cheeks tinted ever-so-slightly scarlet.

"In some ways it's a good thing, you know." His voice was soft. We'd exchanged stories after the battle, and after sleeping for a solid 24 hours we were ready to face the guardians to learn what we could.

"What?" I snapped, glaring at my forepaws.

He sighed, turning towards me as warm breath cushioned on my forehead. "The fact your body's rejecting the darkness is a good sign. I can barely tell the difference when it happens. I feel normal, it doesn't even feel wrong."

I shivered, black scales twitching against purple; he was so warm, and I couldn't come up with a suitable retort.

I shook my head ever so slightly, trying to clear it. What's wrong with me?

"Yeah, I guess," was my uncharacteristically meek reply. I couldn't think straight. My cheeks burned under ebony scales.

He looked at me, confused and concerned, "You sure you shouldn't rest a bit more? You don't seem quite like yourself."

I found myself grateful for his mistake, "Yeah, still not great, I'll live."

"You sure?" The back of one amethyst paw brushed on my forehead, "You're hot."

That's when Sparx cracked up, earning a confused look from Spyro.

It took me a minute to realize he actually didn't know why that'd be weird to sayâ€"he'd never been around teenagers, at least not those that weren't running away as fast as their paws would take them.

I swear I couldn't help itâ€"I cracked up as well. The laughter cracked and faded sadly, but it was there. For the first time since what had happened, I was grinning like a shameless fool.

"If Sparx wasn't laughing, I'd be concernedâ€"yet that's another point of concern in itself," The purple griped. Then he, too, cracked up despite himself, his chuckles making Sparx's "hey" barely audible.

Ignitus found us a few minutes later, looking at us oddly as peels of laughter flew like birds. Raising one eyebrow, his voice reverberated throughout the room, "Do I want to know what's funny?"

Breathing deep, I managed to squeak out a reply, "No, probably not."

It took Sparx and I another look at poor Spyro's befuddled face to break back into overzealous guffaws. Ignitus merely shook his head, and I fully expected another of his 'youth' comments, but he held his tongue. "Compose yourselves, young dragons, we have much to discuss."

It took a look at that wizened, ruby face for my mood to somber; the face was worried and the eyes were focused on something far behind me that I couldn't see.

Damn, this has got to be badâ€|

"Why do I not like where this is going?" Sparx said rhetorically.

"You don't like where anything is going," was my vague attempt at lightening the mood.

"Yeah, well," was the stiff reply, "I'm always right when I think bad things are coming, too. 'Least since we left home."

I snorted, nudging Spyro's shoulder with my quickly-recovering wing, "Yeah, well, you were wrong about him."

"Says you."

"Erm, I'm standing right here, thanks," Spyro cut in, an uncharacteristic sarcastic streak imbedded in his voice.

"Well, someone's gaining a bit of confidence! 'Bout time! Terrador's speech wasn't a waste, then!"

Ignitus had slipped back out sometime, obviously sensing a need for space.

"I don't want to be that monster!"

I sighed, "Spyro, Terrador's right in more ways than one, but he's also not. Everything you have is yours, Spyroâ€"it's also his, hatred amplifiedâ€"but it belongs to both of you. Just because you can't remember a time before it was all you were, doesn't mean all you are was his first."

I sighed, raising a paw and resting it upon a golden chest, above a crack and a mending heart. "You keep thinking about yourself as him changed. But he was you corrupted to begin with!"

He stared at me, those purple eyes deeper and lonelier than the sky. "But what do I have from then? Nothingâ€| What am I but his little shadow? He's more real than I ever wasâ€|"

"You still have the most important thing. You still have yourself." Nervously, I leaned towards him, wrapping wings around his neck in a gentle hug. "Don't you dare lose that, 'kay?"

19. WITHOUT A FAREWELL

Stepping in the door, we found Ignitus' gaze trained once more on the vision pool, the other guardians surrounding it in the same order as ever.

It was always the same order, and there was always the space for two more full-grown dragons. It made me wonder on who they had lost, because while Spyro's poison and fear were not true elements, wind and shadow were. Did they once have their own guardians?

"See anything, Ignitus?" Spyro asked, tail-tip twitching.

"No," his voice was far off, and even the other guardians kept their mouths shut, not wishing for him to lose his concentration. "The path

we must take is invisible to me, only darknessâ€|"

"Lovely," was my terse reply. "What has you so on-edge, anyway?"

"The tainted shadows are growing far too quickly," was the cryptic response. "Waitâ€| This is odd. I see you, Cynder, at the base of a great tree, enveloped within a lake of mist and gloomâ€|"

"A tree?" I sighed, "I think I've seen it beforeâ€| In my dreams, though they usually seem more like nightmaresâ€|"

The red looked at me, "Young dragoness, you should have told me sooner."

I shrugged, "I didn't think they were importantâ€| I thought they'd fade, but they just get worseâ€|"

"What do you see, in these dreams of yours?"

I shivered, "Hmmmâ€| I keep seeingâ€| A mountain draped in shadow, a face of stone beneath two moons, someone crying, glowing skeletons, and darknessâ€|"

Terrador's eyes widened, "The mountain of Maleforâ€|" Beside me, Spyro shook and a crack sounded outsideâ€|like lightning, or the fabric of reality tearing to shreds.

"Anyone else think that was weird?" Sparx muttered.

"There was another; teaching me thingsâ€| Along with a voice deciding to play narratorâ€|he called himself the Chronicler. He showed me the tree."

"Impossibleâ€|" Terrador muttered. I wondered at how solemn and quiet Cyril and Volteer were, nervous.

"Yeah!" Sparx crossed his arms, "There isn't even a storm!"

"The Chronicler?" Cyril cut in, ignoring the small insect.

Flying up to his face, Sparx grumbled, "What? Don't encourage her!"

"I don't believe it, either. I have not heard that name for an exponential amount of timeâ€|" Volteer said tiredly.

Ignitus sighed; amazed, but showing a little hope. "Nor has anyone... But there is no way Cynder could have knownâ€| This is fascinatingâ€|"

"Helpful. Wanna fill us in here?" I grouched. Spyro nodded beside me.

Seeming to remember our presence, Ignitus' ruby-red orbs turned to me. "The Chronicler is an ancient dragon of immeasurable wisdomâ€| Though I've only heard storiesâ€|"

"Well," I huffed, "I know he's a prick."

He chuckled, "I had come to doubt the legitimacy of those tales, yet wisdom and personality faults are hardly one and the same, young dragoness. Yet now, I am left to wonder on whether he may existâ€|"

"Either that, or she's crazyâ€"but we've known that for, like, ever," Sparx griped.

Ignoring the small dragonfly, Terrador's gravelly voice spoke, "But if it is true, it is unsettling that the reemergence of the Chronicler would coincide with an attack on the templeâ€! Not to mention these visions that Cynder's been having,"

Ignitus' sigh crept through the silent room, "Yes, very. Tales of the Chronicler are often interwoven with tales of doom."

"Oh goodie," Sparx snapped, "I was afraid we might have to spend the night without any more doom!"

A great chill filled the room, and Ignitus wordlessly paced out, the others following. Glancing at Spyro, I wordlessly followed, heart rising in my throat.

We emerged on the round plateau where Spyro had fought the assassin, the moons making our assortment of scale-hues gleam like the gems that lent us strength.

Looking at Ignitus, Volteer sighed heavily, "It was only a matter of time, Ignitus. We all felt itâ€"a great evil is on the horizon."

"Perhaps," Ignitus' voice was soft, almost a prayer, "but we must not rush to judgment. This evening has brought about many unexplained things."

Shaking his blue head, Cyril countered tiredly, "We may not have time, Ignitus. The celestial moons are almost at an eclipseâ€"this we know for certain. We must prepare for the worst, the night of eternal darkness draws nigh."

Looking at these dragons, seeming so much older than they really were, seeming ancient, I saw the shadows of the proud generals they had once been. There was a reason a race had placed their future in these able claws.

"If 'nigh' means soon, I'm outta here," A nervous Sparx snapped.

"Your instincts, though faint of heart, are true," Terrador rumbled. "We are no longer safe here. This recent attack is likely the first of many."

Glancing at me and Spyro, he continued grimly, "The forces of the ape king know of your existence, and they won't stop until they've witnessed your demise."

Failing at lightening the mood, Sparx cut in, imitating Terrador's grumbling voice. "Deeemmiiiisssseee. Hehe, hate to be you!"

Fixed with many glares, the golden-bodied insect grumbled, "What? You

guys need to lighten up!"

Shaking his head, Ignitus turned to us, "I'm afraid Terrador is right. As uncertain as things are, none of us can stand idle and watch our worst fears unfold before us."

Sparx smirked, "Exactly! We need a good hiding place!"

I'm not going to say it any more. Just assume that, whatever Sparx says, he's ignored.

"Volteer, you and Cyril must go to the mainland to learn what news you can. Terrador, make haste to the Shattered Veil and warn the inhabitants that darkness is spreading in Malefor. I shall stay here and watch over Myst; in these times, no dragon should remain alone."

Looking down, the great guardian sighed. "May the ancestors look after us in these troubled times," the prayer flew off on the wind, and I looked to the sky.

Kaboa, please, watch over themâ€| Watch over _he_r.

It was obvious I was leaving again.

Slowly drawing in air, I looked to the red dragon, "What should we do, Ignitus?"

Looking at us somberly, the red dragon's voice was soft and sad, "Young dragons, you must take another path to seek the tree from your vision. If the stories of the Chronicler are true, there may be hope for us yet. And I think I know where to begin."

Looking to Volteer, Cyril and Terrador, Ignitus' voice grew stronger, "Go. We do not have time enough to waste any of it. Fly safely and may the wind aid your journey. I have much to explain to these two."

Nodding, the three guardians' wings snapped to the air as their massive bodies rocketed out of sight. I didn't say a thing; didn't know _what_to say. I only prayed to every ancestor for their safe return.

Settling to his belly, Ignitus sighed, wearied. "Cynder, Spyro, there is an ancient grove within the forests of the silver river. It is a secret place, untouched by civilization. The waters there are poisonous, as are the creatures and plants nurtured by it. Do not fly above the trees thereâ€"they release poisonous spores above them that would leave you falling and incapacitated for several days. However, you shouldn't encounter any real danger. Trust your instincts. I shall be waiting for you here when your task is complete."

"What about Myst? Do I have the time to say goodbye?"

"You shouldn't be gone more than a day or two. I will inform her of where you are headed."

My heart lurched for reasons I didn't know, and I looked nervously at Spyro. "Wellâ€| I guess there's no reason to wait, is there?"

He shrugged. "I guess not."

"Are you ready?"

"Are you?" Violet eyes bore into my own.

"Yeah, point taken." I turned to Ignitus, "Tell Myst I promise to be back as soon as I can."

The red nodded, worry etched in those crimson eyes, "Of course."

"Beware, you two," he called behind us, "it worries me that I see but one of you in the tree's shadow."

"Soâ€|" Spyro said warily, "the Chronicler doesn't want me either?"

The red dragon shrugged, "I do not know, but it could be an ill omen to take place before or after you reach the tree. Stick together as well as you can." He looked to Spyro pointedly, "These are dangerous times for any dragon to be wandering about."

"Yeah, I don't really believe in all this fate crap, anyway," I snapped, a little angry.

"Goodbye, Ignitus." Snapping wings out, I shot into the air once moreâ€"wishing with all my heart, despite myself, that fate had a weaker grasp on those under its iron will.

(And a big thank you to Dardarax for providing me with a reason Cyn won't just fly over until she sees the tree)

20. STILL JUST KIDS

The river snaked below, a breathtaking ribbon of starlight silver in a largely barren landscape. Despite everything, and my worries that it would be far too long until my return, the sheer freedom of the moment carried me away. Wind swept around me, battering against my scales with surprising force and washing worries away. At least for an all-too-short moment in time.

My wings swerved through the wind, and I whipped my body into a twirl, letting out a roar of sheer joy. I was out again, and doing something useful at last. No more being trapped in the dusty temple, no more need to please the wizened guardians with books and scrolls and moves and ancestors-know what else. As much as I hated to admit it, for a moment I was away from all those responsibilities. I was flying, and I wasn't worried about what anyone else was doing at the same time.

Whooping despite myself, I tumbled into a cartwheel, warm air curling around me. Spyro eyed me for a moment, confused, but a smile tugging at the sides of his mouth all the same. "You've missed it, huh?"

He knew what he was talking aboutâ€"the wind in your wings, the simplicity that never seems to happen in real life, the very feel of the wind tugging your worries away and into the distance where they can't catch up until you've slowed.

"Some of it, yeah."

He smirked, "I know the feeling. I guess even he couldn't help loving to fly. I always thought it was part of what we areâ€|what was left to meâ€| Part of what I was meant to be, and lost."

I smirked, flapping hard up and diving at him, tapping a golden wing with the blunt of my tailblade. "Tag! You're it!" It felt like years since I had done anything so simple, and a rush of bittersweet sadness reminded me that such a mindless game had set this all in motion at the very beginning.

Spyro only stared at me as I shot away, tilting his head.
"â€|Wha?"

I stared. "Tag! Come on, you gotta have heard of it, even ifâ€|" A blank stare was all I got in return, and I slapped a paw to my forehead, sighing. "You're joking, right?"

Sparx stared at the purple, fighting a laugh, but taking my venomous warning glare into account.

"What's tag?"

I laughed, shaking my head as I came to a hover.

"Ah, young Spyro, you have much to discover about the finer points of life," I droned in a voice incredible close to Cyril's. My impressions always cheered Myst up, and being a relatively depressed dragonâ€"and who could blame her?â€"I got my share of practice.

This got a hearty laugh from the dragon, and I grinned. Even recently, drawing only a wry chuckle from the dragon was a war in itself, but he'd finally started to lighten up.

"Soâ€| Tagâ€| I got you, that's called 'tagging' someone. Got it?"

"Iâ€| guess so? Doâ€|I have to do something now?"

I smirked at him, causing him to shoot me a wary look as I slid wingtips through the wind, positioning myself for a pinpoint turn.
"Well, yeah!"

He eyed me. He'd seen this expression far too often. "â€|And that is?"

"It's simple reallyâ€|" I'd drawn this out far enough. "Catch me if you can!"

I grabbed the wind with my wings, streaking forward and slashing through the morning air like an arrow of ebony against the baby-blue sky.

Spyro stared at me, finally cracking up and shooting after, shouting a whoop of joy to the heavens. "Bring it!"

Bad part of starting a contest of speed? We got there far too quickly. Granted, not getting as much of this crap done as fast as possible might lead to the world's ruin, but it still brought a bitter taste to my mouth to land and forfeit the ability of high-flying for who knows how long. The place was certainly unwelcoming enough as is. The water was putrid and glowing, the tops of the trees releasing clouds of spores. That water frothed and roiled, releasing putrid steam. The trees were tall, thick and eerie, casting shadows with the little light that made it through the spores and fog.

"Well," Spyro muttered, momentary high spirits forgotten. "Isn't this pleasantâ€|"

Sparx glared into eerie silence, "Oh loverly, he always sends us to the nicest placesâ€|"

"Eh, it's not that bad, I've seen worse." Spyro sighed, eyeing the place. "I've _made_worseâ€| This place is almost beautiful; at least it doesn't have much to hurt."

I looked at him, "Guess getting sucked straight into all the insanity at the temple wasn't the best thing ever for you, huh?"

"Yeah, is it weird that this place is almost a relief? You can't see any of the war's aftermath hereâ€|."

"Yeah, sure," Sparx was shaking, "just ignore all the evil beasts and visions of doom and eternal darkness, which sounds oh-so-lovely by the way!"

He flitted in front of Spyro, jabbing him in the nose, "Oh, and the fact that we get to frolic through the magical creepy forest in search of some stupid tree! What's not to love?"

I smirked, "Well, since you're so psyched, let's go!"

"I hate my lifeâ€|"

We jumped over a small glowing river, the strange steam heavy in our lungs. Looking around, I grumbled, "So, are we going to weed whack, or are we going to take the path? Paths usually served us well before, but it worries me one's somewhere 'uninhabited'."

Spyro eyed the underbrush, green and sickly, covered with thorns. "Yeahâ€| I vote path."

"No argument from me."

We flapped back across the stream and onto a ledge, eyeing the darkness warily. "It's too quiet here, in my experience that's never a good sign."

"Too true that," Sparx said, rubbing hands over twig-like arms. "Usually when things are this quiet, something's about to try it's darndest to kill us."

Spyro sighed, "I can say the same, only in reverse. But yeah, point carries through. Silence bad."

A crackle of foliage startled us all, Spyro and I whipping heads around, warily trying to find the source.

"Speak of the devil," I complained ruefully as something blasted forward, missing us only by the blessing of our practiced reflexes.
"Life hates us, doesn't it?"

"Don't need to tell me twice," Sparx replied tersely.

I spun, heat blooming in the back of my throat, preparing a fireball. Only for a mass of pressure to explode against my chest, hurling me into the air until my back struck bark, knocking the wind out of me.

The strange creature bore down on me, bizarre, with a great canine head and the build of a bore. Twice my height, the lumbering brute snarled, opening gargantuan jaws that sent speckles of saliva over me.

Those sabers could bite clean through me, and would have; I was too dazed to do anything. However, something exploded from the earth beneath the creature, a familiar purple form lunging from the soil. Golden horns slammed up and through the creature's softer stomach, leaving trails of crimson tears before he vanished into the dirt once again.

It was a trick he'd shown me before, forcing the earth around him to form a tunnel and push him through. It took a ton of elemental energy, but like me he must have realized the weakest point of such a tank would be the stomach that's never exposed. Exploding out of the ground behind the stunned beast, Spyro jumped, landing on its back.

With a growl like a wildcat, the dragon reared, forepaws glowing green, before he fell back to all fours. His claws met tough scalp with the sickening sound of tearing tissue, and blood burst forth as the beast swayed, then fell to the earth, dead.

It was the most flawless attack I'd ever seen from him, no hesitation whatsoever.

â€|

They both looked at me, her luminescent green eyes digging into my scales. I fidgeted nervously; she'd been so close to getting gnawed in half! I'd let go, but I'd been balanced. I was still me the whole time. It still felt dirty and animalistic, but it was necessaryâ€| Is what Terrador said true, that that's the same for anyone fighting? Cynder stood, looking at me. Mad? Impressed? Nervous? I didn't know, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Something came slashing forward, and an ear-splitting screech an awful lot like a boar's call slit through silence with a razor's tip. We lost ourselves in the fight, dodging and whirling around our foe like we'd practiced so many times in the guardians' arena.

After defeating the creatures, we continued on. Cynder kept glancing at me, causing my scales to burn. I was grateful for the gloom, it hid it well.

We came to a clearing surrounded by trees that grew next to each other, forming a great wall.

"Well, what now? I certainly don't want to spend enough time to hack through that many trunks," Cynder sighed, eyes darting around the clearing. "One would be fine though."

The eloquent dragoness darted to an aged tree in the middle, shadows forming, like flickering dark flame around her forepaws. She reared up, slashing weathered bark with smooth, slick strokes, almost artistic in nature, like dancing. Her whole body waved from side to side with each slash, tail whipping back and forth like a playful serpent.

The ease of finding a solution surprised me. I had seen weathered soldiers take hours on something half as simple to figure out—snarling and grumbling like ill-tempered bears the entire time. Including myself as the General. But then, in a similar situation, the monster that was once me would have preferred slashing through the thicket, just for the crunch of broken wood under calloused paws.

With a creak, Cynder knew it was ready. Glancing to make sure Sparx and I were out of the line of fire, she darted to the opposite side of the great tree and reared. Black forepaws struck weathered wood, but only another creak rewarded her efforts. Glancing at me, Cynder sighed, "Whatcha waiting for? An invitation?"

"Uh—oh!" I shook my head, tearing it away from my thoughts, and darted to her side. Balancing on my back legs, I jabbed my forepaws forward, hitting old wood and sending the tree down with a satisfying crash. Some small remnant of the power I once held lingered in these legs.

Flashing a smirk, the obsidian dragon hopped up on the fallen log, tail waving. "Come on, airhead, places to go, bizarre mutants to kill, ancient annoying spirits to infuriate and all that. Ring a bell?"

"Uh yeah—" My cheeks were burning again as I hopped up beside her and Sparx laughed at me.

"Tsk," Cynder smirked. "When in unknown land, it's generally a good idea to keep an eye on what's liable to pounce on you, sound smart?"

"Yeah, sorry, I was thinking—"

The joking air vanished from her eyes, "I'm hardly perfect at this either, just remember you aren't him anymore, and this isn't the arena. You don't have an army or a simple thought to get you out of anything that happens here."

"I know, believe me, I do—" I turned my head, looking towards the eerie path forward. "It's just weird. When I was him, I never had to think. I wasn't allowed to; my head was either gone, or numbed and buzzing. If it wasn't him blocking me out, it was me, burying myself in fog so I could stop feeling like I was doing things wrong. It's hard to think now; I'm so used to not having the option. There's so

much space, how are you supposed to fill it?"

â€|

I looked at him, aghast. I didn't have an answer. My head was full of places I'd been; memories. My heart was full of all the friends I'd grudgingly accepted I could stand. Mom, Dad, Sparx, Spyro, Myst, Ignitus, Terrador, Volteer, Cyril, Kane, Mole-Yair, and so many others. The people who'd helped to shape me and who I am, even only a little.

But what did Spyro have left? Bitter memories of violence, hate and lust for blood. Is that all he had before? Of course he would find things distract himself, if subconsciously. And of course he would feel the General was all he had been before.

What a terrible fate, to have nothing but that to live on, and now it was taken away, the only thing he hadâ€| Of course he felt empty, lost and alone.

"Iâ€|" What could I say? What wasn't weak, pointless and unhelpful? "I think you can find that out on your own, that's what we all have to do at some point, I figure. Sometimes life gives us hell; it has for you."

I remembered something; I wasn't sure where it came from. It felt so familiar, like a lullaby sung by a voice I should recognize. "Spyro, I heard something a long, long time ago. Yesterday is done, tomorrow is yet to come, and today will never dawn again. So regret not the past, treasure the present, and fear not the future."

Sparx sighed, "What happened to the Cynder I knew? You're turning into a freaking sage with all this sentimental stuff!"

I only shrugged, eyes on Spyro. "I guess pain and war can do that to the lucky onesâ€| "

22. SCAVANGERS

"What's that thing?" Spyro wrinkled his nose at something in the middle of the next clearing, tail twitching.

I shrugged, "It's a mushroom, or something similar. You'd be surprised what forms they can come in."

We trotted past and fluttered down a ledge, lighting down in swamp water. I sighed, but didn't complain, I'd spent years living in swampland.

Crossing through a hole in the ground, I let out a startled cry. Something grabbed onto meâ€"tiny, but with jaws any predator had to admire. I shook, flailing my tail until I caught under the thing. Pushing it to the ground, I kicked it, breaking the segmented body into pieces.

I looked down at the insect, a purple glow dyeing with its light, and a touch of nausea curled my stomach.

That was what any dragon, ape, or anything else could easily do to

Sparx if they could only catch him.

We fluttered over a poisoned lake and lighted down on the other side, to be greeted by a familiar form.

Swamp Giant.

It was smaller than the last, and just as flammable, burning to a crisp easily. The things used flammable plant matter as a cover for their bodies, which was helpful for us. Only ones that were wet proved a problem.

We flew over yet another sickly purple pond, dangerously close to the cloud of spores, but I preferred that to the writhing, venom-spitting worms below.

"You know," Spyro said, "even if we can't fly too high, I think it might be wise to keep off the ground. Seems like most life here doesn't really like us."

I snorted. I supposed he'd had fewer problems when he was huge; few things could mistake him as an easy snack. "Ha, welcome to my life. But yeah, you're right."

We flapped right over a pack of the howling 'boar-hounds,' as I had decided to dub the things. They screamed up challenges, pawing the earth, which we promptly ignored.

I sighed, looking at my companions, "What the hell are we doing here? I'm not even sure what we're supposed to be looking for!"

"Think we're lost?" Spyro sighed.

I shrugged, "Somewhat. I know how to get us out of here, but we've been lost to where exactly we're going the whole time."

"Reassuring."

"Don't blame me, blame the Crawlacker."

"Craw-lacker?" Spyro blinked at me.

I shrugged, "Well, you need a craw to talk, it's another word for a throat, but he's a disembodied voice, so he doesn't have a throat. Get it?"

Spyro laughed. "I expected better than that from you. That's something your brother would come up with."

"I heard that!" Sparx's speech was punctuated with a large burp. He was scarfing down small butterflies.

I sighed heavily. "Sparx, don't eat that, do you have any idea what it is?"

He clutched his stomach, releasing another phenomenal burp. "Nonsense, it's perfectly edible."

That was when a voice pierced through the gloom, rugged and grating.

"Alright, maggots! Time to spread out."

Gritting teeth, I grabbed Sparx's sparkling form and Spyro's gold wing and pulled them both into a crouch, eyeing the strange anthropomorphic hounds in the gloom.

"Don't bother snaring anything smaller than a scurvy wing. Scabb only wants prize fighters this time. And double the bounty for the one who captures Arrrborick!"

"Those are Scavengers, right? I read a bit about them in Ignitus' races dictionary!"

Spyro nodded, whispering back, "Yeah, careful, they focus on capturing other races to use in an arena, and they're good at it. Even dragons and servants of the Dark Master. I don't know how they keep the stronger creatures under control, and frankly I don't want to find out."

"Can't argue with that."

"Iggie said this place is supposed to be uninhabited," I turned, slinking along the ground. "We must have taken a wrong turn!"

"All in favor of turning ba--"Cyn, you okay, girl?"

I was swaying; my head felt like it was set to be split in half. Something was tugging at me again, and my consciousness was dragged out of my body once again, into darkness. It swirled around me, pulling me back into a dream.

Crap, Crawlacker, your timing sucks.

!"

I flinched as Cynder struck the ground with an audible thud, causing the pirate dogs to whip around in search of the source.

"It came from over there! Go see what it is."

Sparx hiccupped and I shot him a warning glance, but it was too late--another chaotic belch snapped through the air, loud and clear.

He looked at us nervously, probably remembering how hard it was to keep from tripping over Cynder last time she had been unconscious, and these hounds were fiercer than the lumbering bulb spiders had been.

Gulping, the small dragonfly looked at me, "Look after her."

He flew out in front of the dogs, shivering. "So, uh-- How is everyone today?"

The Scavengers stared, until one couldn't help but crack up. Were the situation any less dire, I would have chuckled, but I was busy keeping my breathing shallow and quiet.

"Heh heh, little bug isn't much bigger than a bog-rat!"

Oh noâ€|

Sparx's eyes hardened angrily, "Hey! Who you calling a bog-rat, you cross-eyed, matted, mangy drool-mutt!"

Lips curled up to reveal fangs and the pirate dogs lunged after him, causing the gold bug to squeak and fly in the opposite direction.

I looked after him guiltily. I couldn't leave Cynder defenseless, and Sparx could just fly up.

If he thought of itâ€|

23. I PROVE AGEOLD SPIRITS CAN GET ANNOYED

I awoke on cold stone for the second time, teeth gritting in irritation. "Yo, old guy! Let me out of here! You sort of made me pass out right near a horde of Scavengers!"

"â€|Patience is a virtue."

"Yeah, well, it's a virtue I conspicuously lack, so get me the hell out of here!" This place was so cold it crept into my body and sent shivers jarring up my spine.

No reply.

I flapped tiredly to the next stone platform, mentally berating whatever made flight so hazardous here. Alighting on the platform, I paced forth to yet another stone, this one glowing a frost-ridden azure. Glaring at the stone, I growled, "You there, old guy? I've done what you've asked and all it's gotten me is lost!"

"As long as the spirits of the ancestors are with you, you are never lost."

I sighed, "If you're talking about yourself, I'm more lost when you're talking than ever!"

"Calm yourself, Cynder, and cool your thoughts."

I snorted. "Only for the sake of getting my fighting ability back."

I paced forward as azure mist spilled from thin air, surrounding me in a flurry of snowy brilliance. The mist was so cold it took my breath away, swirling into a plume of fog that joined the queue of blue around me. It surrounded me, calming, like rest and winter, but still the promise of a new dawn to come.

It didn't take long for the voice to come; a soft, sleepy whisper that was vaguely feminine, stern but gentle.

'_Do not let your fire control you. There are other elements that you may siphon your strength from. The power of frost, of blizzards, of winter itself also runs through your veins, just as the chilled winds whip through your wings. Let it wind around you and bring clarity to battle's dance. Let it aid you, and shape it as you see fitâ€|'_

A crackle around me, icicles forming as fog grew so cold it froze solid. Huge spikes of ivory ice forming in still, slack air and twirling around me. As ice exploded along the ground that would freeze anything solid, the great, watery spears shot out around me, embedding themselves inches into weathered stone. They were left to melt there, leaving scores in the ancient platform that could last centuries.

The voice was faint, proud as it whispered, '_I knew you'd remember. You have such strength left untappedâ€| Just remember, there are many facets to any power, just as a small icicle can form a blaze of color on the land if placed correctlyâ€| Life seeks out balance._'

"Indeed it does." I blinked. Did the Chronicler just respond to the voice? I'd thought it was just some obscure figment of my mind set to guide me again through what I already knew. But I supposed that wasn't likely anymore, unless both it and the Chronicler were figments of my imagination. But then, I didn't think even I was warped enough to invent idiot narrator extraordinaire.

"And even one who can only master fire and ice is indeed a force to be reckoned with in the shifting face of danger."

Yeah, well, at least he wasn't making ice puns. I massaged my forehead tiredly. If these voices were just in my head, then my head was a crowded place.

After solidly refusing to train in an element I had already mastered, I flapping tiredly from platform to platform until I reached the endâ€"a great, roofless room with an azure pool of visions in its heart.

I paced to the blue pool, sighing, "'Kay, gramps. Now what? What else do you want me to do? Call me nuts, but I think I'm entitled to know what the hell I'm supposed to be doing."

The ancient dragon's sigh whispered over the snow-ridden wind. "You already know what is happening; of the great evil that is awakeninâ€""

"No. No, I don't! No one tells me who he is or why he's doing it! No one tells me what it is I'm doing or why either, certainly not you! How do I know what I've been told of you is true? How do I know you're not the Dark Master, or with him?" My voice was venom by now. I missed Kaboa; I didn't want to deal with this supposed great dragon who enjoyed talking in monotone and being as unhelpful as physicallyâ€"or not physically in this case, as he was a disembodied voiceâ€"possible. Kaboa had at least tried to be as helpful as she could, despite whatever ancestor's-forsaken thing controlled her.

That was when the wind stiffened, losing its wily ways and fading into oblivion. A great, oppressive silence then fell like a heavy, stifling blanket.

"We don't have the time for willful prattle, little dragon." The voice was even stiffer than before, enough that it made some part of me want to curl up and hide. This being had authority, and would use it.

I was stubborn however, and ebony lips writhed up over ivory fangs. "And we have time to fool around finding your mystic moon temple crap? Tell me why I'm here or I'm leaving! I'll go find whoever's in charge and off them, or whatever I need to do, but following you on a wild goose chase is not what we need!"

"Fine, little dragon. I suppose you deserve to see a little of what waits along the wrong path."

For a moment I was dizzy, and then I was nowhere at all—"lost in black. Then something formed; a tall, piercing mountain that cut through a cloak of dusk and gloom. Rivers of smoldering poison flowed down the rocky slope, crackling and bubbling like death.

It was the place in my nightmares. "I've seen this place before!"

The Chronicler sighed once more, the slight trace of anger abandoning him. "This is an evil place, Cynder."

I glanced at the intimidating fortress. "_No_, really?"

"It is called the mountain of Malefor. Asylum to the lost and wandering sprits of those who have turned to malice. But to those spirits, and to the black of heart, it goes by another name."

A hiss came from somewhere within me, lost and melancholy, whispering a name I'd never known. "The Well of Souls!"

And there he came, One-Eye himself, muttering the same name to the storm-blackened skies, almost in agreement.

"The Well of Souls!"

A/N: Teehee, Cynder, I dunno, you may just be that warped. Soooo sorry for the long wait, but please still grace me with a review? Feel free to yell at me, it's only fair. XD

Some SpyCyn for your thoughts? I have a new one-shot up just for you SpyXCyn fans out there, and it also has a list of a few of the reasons I've been gone. Oh, and plushie Myst is watching the screen on my shoulder now! Teehee, just thought you should know. :P I really ought to finish the plush Cyn I'm making, but I'm far too lazy. -_-'
TT4N!

TT4N!)

24. A WORLD WITHOUT DEATH

The world faded white, and I was once again thrown headfirst into reality. Right when I was learning something useful at last.

"I hate my fantasy land, it needs a renovation," I growled tersely.

"Bet you don't have ginormous dogs chasing you in your dreams." While sarcastic, the purple dragon's voice was weary, worried and relieved.

"Well no, but I don't have an idiot narrator in real life," I replied to Spyro heavily.

"Can you stand? Sparx is being chased by pirates," he cut in frankly. He seemed tired, depressed. "He flew off trying to distract them, but I couldn't leave you knocked out with those Boarhounds and ancestors know what else aboutâ€|"

"Why am I not surprised? Next time, go after him, I can look after myself," I said tersely. "Which way did he gâ€?"

A familiar, glowing form flashed up to us, stopping and staring at me. "Oopsâ€|" He'd come from behindâ€| He'd managed to loop back without realizing it, white dogs and all.

"Great distraction, wise one," I turned, eyeing the bizarre scavengers, sarcasm dripping from my voice. Irritation flooding me, I launched forward.

Behind me I could hear Sparx's query, "What's got her tail in a knot?"

â€|

Cynder fell on the dogs, slashing and twirling in a way that brought her blades whistling through the air, nothing I could fight near easily. Not if I didn't want to be decapitated by accident. Looking at Sparx, I could only shrug helplessly. "The Chronicler guy, I thinkâ€|"

And then Sparx realized who he was talking to. Flitting away, he crossed his arms and turned his back.

Easy come, easy go.

After an ill-tempered and blood-splattered Cynder had finished her unfortunate work, we continued. Heavy silence hung in the air, thick and suffocating. Cynder was glaring at her forepaws as if they had personally wronged her.

I drew a deep breath and hoped I wasn't about to get my head verbally cut off. "So, do you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" Her tail-tip twitched from side to side irritably.

I sighed and opted for the blunt approach. It was what she would do after all. "Why you're glaring at your paws like they are responsible for the death of a family member."

The black dragon shrugged helplessly. "Probably nothingâ€| It's just that in the last dream I said something. I have no idea where it came from or how I knew it, it didn't even feel like me speaking."

"Is it possible you've heard it before somewhere? What'd you say?"

She sighed, "I knew the Mountain of Malefor place the Guardians mentioned is Theâ€""

I shuddered, "Please, don't say that name. The whole Dark Army knows its lore. The tainted pit the Dark Master drew from the depth of the earth, supposedly the hearth of evil's heart. It's the only place I can't remember from when I was the General. The little sanity I had at the time fled whenever I went near the place."

She shivered, black scales blending into the shadows. Her pink underbelly almost fit in here, shimmers of venomous pinks and purples not uncommon. We were both dusted over with sludge and grime by now. While uncomfortable, I couldn't say it didn't help disguise us. I vaguely remembered enemyâ€"at the time, at leastâ€"assassins covering scales or fur with caked mud and dust.

His memoriesâ€"my memories were getting clearer.

"I don't know, it was a dream. Maybe that's why?"

The silence resumed. When enemies appeared we merely took to the air. What was the point? The other creatures here had no way to reach us and weren't part of the Dark Master's army. Cynder seemed to have taken personal offence at the Scavenger's attempt to hurt Sparx, though. If one of the canines was in the proximity, it died.

At one point we passed a small Scavenger shipâ€"which burned. She summoned a great bout of nearly-liquid fire and sent it rushing at the ship. The blast indvertibly lit a cannon's fuse, and from it blasted a led cannonball. We ended up with a path from a previously dead endâ€"so we took it.

We flew by one of the Scavengers' sick Scurvywingsâ€"I had encountered the birds as the General. They weren't hard and their feathers were flammable. It was dealt with quickly.

Darting away from the falling corpse, we rounded a bend and flapped over a trio of swamp-giants surrounding yet another venomous pool. It wouldn't be the last of similar arrangements we would see, either.

Passing through a cave, the two of us stopped in our tracks.

"What. The. Hell?"

â€|

I tossed the rock up and over, catching it in my other paw. Then back.

Back and forth, back and forth.

What was I supposed to do? Mom and Dad were wrong. There are things worth fightingâ€"worth dying for, if you must.

Back and forth, back and forth.

The rock clicked against my snowy scales. They were painfully clean, not like they used to be. I had no dirt to walk through, no way to really get dirty. I'd been taking baths several times a day. There was little I could do, so I over-killed everything.

Back and forth, back and forth.

I used to be able to talk to the guardians if Cynder was busy, or Spyro, or even Sparx. Only Ignitus remained now, though, and he was preoccupied with the pool.

Back and forth, back and forth.

I want to be able to helpâ€"be able to do something. Not just sit here praying. If the ancestors really could help, and haven't, they don't deserve our prayers. I shook the thought offâ€"mom and dad were in their number.

I missed and the rock jarred to the side. Flicking a paw, a jab of wind sent it back to my forepaws.

Maybe there is a way I can help. Maybeâ€| I stood, flicking the rock back and slamming it with my chipped tailblade. It hit, and then ricocheted off, landing by my forelegs.

I snorted in pointless irritation. I paced forward through the arch, and looked up at the intimidating statue. Slipping my paw across the wall, I found the switch that lowered it.

With a grinding roar, the statue slipped beneath the floor.

Yellow-tinted eyes narrowed in determination.

If I asked a guardian first, I would be brushed aside and informed I'm too young to fight.

What is childhood? An elder in the village once said childhood is a land where one believes anything can last forever.

I know better now. If I helped a little, if I made sure there was one dragon for which that childhood could lastâ€"helping the war would be worth it.

Squinting my eyes, I concentrated and a single, straw dummy appeared.

Darting forward, I spun around it, twirling until my tailblade slammed into the thing's chest. It dissolved into air.

Childhood cannot be measured by physical growth, nor can it be measured by time.

Another appeared and I leapt forward. Forepaws dug into the straw by half a foot.

Childhood is a world where somethingâ€"where anything can last forever.

I jumped over another and slammed my back legs into its back, throwing it forward.

Childhood is a world where nobody dies.

Biting into cold straw, I cringed at the taste.

The Dark Armies had taken my childhood away.

I refuse to be useless. I can and will make a difference.

25. FOR THE GREATER GOOD

(To celebrate S1 of Korra- there is a blatant Avatar:TLA reference in here! Bet you can find it! And a HP reference in the title as well :3)

"Whoa! Did we get sucked into convexity again? I've seen a ton of weird, but this is too much!"

"Don't ask me, I'm hardly the expert."

"What about you, Purpley?" Sparx jabbed a finger at one of the great rubbery masses. "You know about convexity, right?"

"No idea. Maybe they got out of convexity."

"That's reassuring," the gold bug muttered.

And then the jellyfish flashed yellow. And Sparx screamed.

A moment of panic later and I held my shocked brother in my paws.

"I have an idea," he muttered feebly, "let's stay away from sparky sparky boomfish."

"Sparky sparky boomfish?"

"Cawlacker's worseâ€|"

I smirked, relieved he was alive enough to jest. "Debatable."

"Are we moving or not?" Spyro muttered.

"Hey! I'm injured!"

Spyro sighed, "I've gotten a worse wound from a blind Manweresmall lady's walking stick. And I was bigger then."

I laughed, shaking my onyx head. "Now I wanna hear how that happened!"

"No, trust me. You don't. It involves blood and a lot of burned homes."

A pregnant silence took hold of the air. I shivered, remembering too late just how unlikely it was for Spyro to have a lighthearted story to tell. "Guess I'll trust you there, Violet."

Spyro sighed. "Sparx is right; you need to work on your nicknames. Not that he's better."

"Hey!" Previously mentioned gold dragonfly crossed his arms, "I resent that!"

I snorted, eager to tempt the conversation away from Spyro's past.

"Sparxie, Sparxie, give Violet here more ammunition and I'll boom you into next week."

"Nice," Sparx griped sarcastically. But his eyes were laughing.

We flitted into the air and darted above the shimmering jellyfish, pushing the limits before being immersed in poison spores. They almost looked like glimmering deadly stepping stones beneath us. Looking down at the deadly path, I was once again grateful that I had a nice set of wings.

The Skavengers' scent was pulled along on the wind, making me shiver. I could have sworn I'd caught a faint trace of that scent before. But when I tried to pinpoint the memory it slipped by like the ghost of a dream. Elusive, like trying to grab a pawful of smoke.

"I know what to call those things!" Sparx's voice slashed into my thoughts. "Combustion fish!"

I growled in fake irritation, "They're electric! That suggests they either explode or light on fire!"

Spyro glanced at me, smirking. He seemed as eager to forget the ghosts of his past as I was. "Now who's the walking dictionary? Talking to Volteer a bit too often?" The ghost of a frown still hugged his purple muzzle, pulling at my heart. Even in laughter he had a sort of slump about him. He'd become better at hiding it, but it was still there.

I darted over, nudging his shoulder with a paw. "Volteer's a thesaurus, not a dictionary! I don't think even he knows the exact definition of everything he says!"

"This is just proof the both of you spend way too much time in what's left of the temple library."

With a grin I replied, "Time spent with books is never wasted!"

"Stop pretending to be wise," Sparx huffed. "I'm serious, Blackie! It's creepy!"

I turned to Spyro. "Well, what do you think?"

The purple dragon shrugged and sent me a forced smile, "I dunno, I'm pretty okay with anything that bugs the bug."

"I still resent that by the wayâ€|"

"It's a totally different topic!"

We darted over a mossy cliff-face and a few more boarhounds. The place had us all on edge, pulling us into the reassuring banter we loved so well.

â€|

Glancing over the aged pages, my eyes widened.

"Shit!" A word I hadn't used in a good twenty years curled off my

tongue. Launching to my feet and across the room, a great snarl hurled from my chest. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Scavengers? How dare you! You know what they'll do if they find another dragon!"

The silvery dragon chose that moment to materialize. "She'll get here sooner. And such language is beneath you. While I respect your irritation, I expect you to hold your tongue."

"Irritation? I am far beyond irritated, and what do you mean beneath me? I was raised by dogs, what do you expect?" I strode forward, lips curling over ivory teeth. "But you know that, don't you? You arranged for the apes to find my parents. I've read my own book. Them or one purple dragon's grandparents, wasn't it? You knew what my childhood would become."

The bluish dragon's eyes narrowed. "I do what must be done. When I must twist fate, I will. If a few must perish for the world's sake, so be it."

I turned in disgust, shooting a glare back. "You don't care, do you? Millennia have turned you into a chess master and we're all pawns in your eyes. What am I to you? Your chess queen? My mate and child nothing more than game pieces?"

"You chose to come here yourself. You knew it would be hard to be a watcher."

"Not for you, old man. Never for you." I slipped off and into a shadow, shoulders slumping in defeat.

26. CHARRREDBORICK

"Wonder how that happened, it seems like it'd be remarkably hard to set something on fire in a swamp."

"Yeah, no idea." We flitted over a wrecked ship, flames flicking over the surface. My black and pink wings cupped the moist swamp-air. "Look how it's torn apart. Bet you we'll be forced to meet whatever did that."

"No bet. Not with our luck." Spyro sounded bitter.

"Well, this looks ominous." Sparx was eyeing the tunnel we were coming up on.

"How is this tunnel different from every other tunnel we've ever encountered? Especially when you willingly flew into Serpenthead pass despite the millennia of times we were told it's dangerous?"

"Serpenthead pass?" Spyro cocked his head.

I shrugged, "Old place from the swamp, Sparx thought hiding there was smart. Ended up being turned into a lantern by an ape patrol. Shame they're gone now, really. The fact they actually found a use for him was amazing!"

Spyro smirked, "Something tells me lantern was an improvement."

We stepped out, looking off a cliff into a huge swath of glowing purple water. In the middle a tree sprung forthâ€"the tree.

"Somehow it feels a lot more anticlimactic than it did in the dreamâ€!"

"So that's your dumb tree? It's beautiful, can we go now?"

I looked at the two boys, shrugging helplessly. "This feels like the right place, butâ€!" I looked at my forepaws, sighing.

"You've no idea what you're doing," Spyro summed up effortlessly.

"Yeahâ€!"

"Wonderful!" Sparx smacked his face. "I'm going to wait over thereâ€"you know, give you a few minutes. Who knows, maybe there was a lily pad you forgot to sing on or a rainbow you could talk to!"

I didn't have a retort. I'd dragged them here on the word of a disembodied voice in my dreams. What if Iggy was wrong? I'd trust him with my life, yes, but we were toying with legends here. Who could say if the Chronicler couldn't be some sort of elaborate trapâ€"or even that he had the answer to this war?

A creak ran through the putrid air, and then anotherâ€"cannon-blasts in the night.

The old tree shuddered, a great beast trying to shake a fly. A great wooden hand grasped for the darkened sky, reaching for the gold-bejeweled black.

Something was climbing out of the ravine. Toweringâ€"when it rose, its head alone was at least twice my height. A hinged mouth groaned, gaping to reveal no throat and the circular age-lines of an ancient tree.

Standing erect like an ape, the strange creature seemed to be an embodiment of this horrid place. Long grasping arms of wood and vine, gangly legs like tree-trunks, eyes that glimmered purple like the swamp's putrid water. Rivers of venom burbled down its sides, glowing a sick amethyst.

"It's my turn to pass out nowâ€"you're on your own, sis." Sparx fell, and I hastily shoved him into his pocket of the bag. In the months at the temple I had added another pouch, padding it so it would be remarkably hard to crush him.

"Bet that thing isn't friendlyâ€!" Spyro studied it.

"They never seem to be." I slunk along the cliff side, building power in my jaws. Jerking them open I spat a ruby ball of flame.

Slamming into the creature's side, it exploded, trying to catch on wet wood. Purple steam tainted the air, but that's about all I accomplished.

"Shit!" I attempted a glob of water, slamming into his side and then hardening to ice.

One of the beast's hands slammed forward. Ducking into dragon time, I slammed Spyro to the side. Tumbling over thick grass, we avoided the punchbarely.

Untangling ourselves, I shot forward. Wings cracking on moist wind, I rose, snapping them to my sides and falling into a dive. Flames hissed around my paws, spreading to envelope my forelegs, my shoulders, my belly and neck, my haunches, and finally my wings and tail. A living comet fell, slamming black forepaws into a thick, wooden skull.

I dug my claws in, shoving down ruby-bathed haunches and slamming my back legs in as well. Scraping claws against wood left long blackened rifts that burst into flame only to sputter out.

Bringing my maw an inch from weathered wood, I shot a stream of water from my mouth. Filling the new rifts, I froze it. The creature bellowed as the ice dug into woody flesh, tearing the gashes wider and wider.

Suddenly Spyro was beside me, sharpening fire-encased claws on hard swamp-wood. From inside the ice-encased cuts, purple glimmered.

"Spyro, run!" When he didn't react fast enough I grabbed a gold horn in my jaws. Jumping, I slammed my back legs down, throwing us both back.

I was a second too late. Acidic water shot from the cut a moment before we were clear, spraying across Spyro's haunches.

Spyro screamedâ€"a pain-filled, blood-curdling shriek that rent through my bones and tore my heart apart. The acidic liquid sizzled, burrowing into purple scales and scorching the skin beneath to nothing.

Grasping his shoulders I flapped desperately, guilty as my fore-claws dug in to get a decent grip. He had grown since beforeâ€"more than I had. Lifting him burst fire through my wings, through my forelegs.

I jerked us to the highest ledge I could, screaming curses as we tumbled onto damp soil.

Shoving through my bag, I yanked out the biggest chunk of red crystal I could findâ€"pushing it into Spyro's side before it could dissolve into my sore pad.

Glimmering ruby light flickered across the burn. A purple tint in the flowing blood faded, calling back the normal red. The scorched purple skin began to lighten to normal as a scab crawled over.

Finally, scales began to form. Light and new, they lined the edge of the scorch, shrinking it. The wound was still large, but it wasn't as bad. The edges were now lined with new, healing scales. Skin crept forth from there, pink and tender. What wasn't covered in new skin and scale had a clean scab stretched over. The sight of the reddened scale, skin and scab made my stomach lurchâ€"but it was better than

it had been moments before.

Satisfied the acidic poison wouldn't creep farther into his blood, I whipped around. Spyro had passed out from the pain. It was me and thisâ€|thing.

My eyes narrowed. Something was shining on my nose, a faint, sick, white light. Where was it coming from?

A hint of dark shadow twisted around my forepaws. I didn't care.

Whipping my head up, my lips writhed over sharp white teeth. Proud and terrible, I screamed my challenge to the heavens in a mighty roar.

My sanity stripped away, I barreled forward.

I didn't remember why or howâ€"all I knew was that I was going to rip that wooden pile of tree scraps into little bloody pieces.

I _wanted _to.

27. BROKEN

The beast that was once me threw herâ€"it_self forward. Dark shadow sprawled over black scales, cocooning me in a net of hate I didn't even want to escape. Writhing lips rose over fangs in a growl that could send the Dark Master himself running for cover.

Slamming forward into the oaken monster's face, I slipped down. Shadow and forepaws merged and dug into one side of a hinged jaw.

Flailing, a great hand slammed at me and hit spikes of shadow, suddenly substantial. The great hinged jaw opened to roar and I slammed myself forward. Fire, now utterly feral, roared from my maw. It looked redderâ€"streaks of purple glimmering at its heart. Flickering, it surged to join the shadow that used to be my paw.

With a victorious shriek, I slashed my claws forward. The stubborn wood of moments before seemed to have become butter. My claws slid through and I dodged back before the beast's purple blood burst forth.

A sight that would usually only turn my stomach sent satisfaction rolling over me. The great mouth was hanging from the one remaining hinge, acidic blood flowing down the beast's front in great rivers.

Grinning, I sent a blast of shadow forward, once more with a glimmer of sick amethyst at its heart. The blast latched onto the thing, enveloped the sick purple blood and laced it with shadow.

And then the beast went insane. The black fire that spiked its blood pierced wooden skin, billowing out in spiked plumes. Wood began to burn with shadow-drenched flame as it arched over the tree-monster's bark-like skin. Gleaming purple eyes were tainted with shadow as a

screech of agony exploded towards the heavens.

I crowed, grinning at the creature's pain. Loosing a great, tainted thunderbolt, I slammed forward and into the air. Adrenaline gave me strength as my wings slashed outward to pound damp air.

"Die now."

Tainted fire bloomed around my forepaws, bathing my front a bloody hue. That flame crept up to my elbows and upwards until my forelegs were transformed into tainted beacons.

"Cynder, _stop!_" The weak cry was barely audible, yet I was unable to ignore it.

Unfortunately, I wasn't the only one who couldn't help but hear.

The feral beast's gemlike eyes narrowed as it spun around, joints rumbling like an avalanche.

One fist pulled back before slamming forward, and fear wrenched the shadows away when I saw where it was headed.

"_No!_"

The air was dyed blue as my wings pounded through it, desperately shooting me forward. Eyes squeezed shut as my forepaws stretched forward, even as tainted flame dissipated around them.

My forepaws met their mark as momentum carried me forward and him out of danger.

Then pressure exploded against my side and blackness ripped the world away.

â€|

"Cynder, _stop!_"

She was gone. Her eyes were bare as ice, glittering with naught but malice as her last traces of sanity were burnt away. I hated how well I knew the feeling, the exhilaration. Caught in a nightmare disguised by adrenaline and false satisfaction.

"Cynder, this isn't youâ€|" The whisper was so quiet even I couldn't hear it.

That was when the mountain of wood and shadow swung its crazed gaze to meet mine. I knew what was happening. The shadow was burning the thing's blood and woody flesh, driving it mad with fear and desperate bloodlust. A cornered, feral, wild-thing facing death.

And now it thought I was a threat.

Creaking, a great arm began to ascend. Desperately, I struggled to trembling paws. My haunches still felt like they were burning and I collapsed again, panting. Too much of my blood was drying on my scales instead of flowing in my veins where it belonged. I hadn't had the time to use my power to get the venom out quickly either. The gem's power had removed it, but not quickly enough. It would take

several days to heal completely.

Several days I didn't have at the moment.

All the determination in the world couldn't urge my tired, broken body to get up and move the five feet it would take to get me out of the way of the shadow-engulfed fist.

I barely saw the black and pink blur until her forepaws landed on my side, shoving me those five feet.

I could only watch in horror as the monster's fist met her. Big as she was, it sent her tumbling off.

It was the creature's final move, though. The last of its energy consumed, the great fist fell to scorched earth. Slipping sadly off the cliff, it was followed by a mournful splash as a great body met acidic water.

"C-Cynder." My voice was shattered and weak as I pulled myself forward. I slipped my paw under her, desperately hoping.

There it was. The steady twitch of a pulse, thank the ancestors. I didn't have the strength to move, so I let my head fall to the earth.

"What theâ€?" Oh great. "You killed it? We came all this way so you could kill it?"

Somebody shoot me.

"Since Cynder isn't awake, I'll tell you what she would say," I snarled. A headache was causing my head to pound and the world to spin out of focus. "One. Does that look like a dragon to you? Thus, it is not the Chronicler. Two, I doubt Cynder is willing to negotiate with violent feral beasts."

"Duh. That wasn't a dragon. Dunno know what your little bug thing is smokin', but I want some."

I turned my head to see the dog captain, and fruitlessly tried to fill my maw with flame. I didn't have the strength.

The universe must really hate the two of us.

28. DEMON MENAGARIE

The cacophony of howling woke me in the middle of the night. Again.

I struggled blearily to ivory paws, weary from a long day of training.

Struggling to a chest in the corner, I undid the latch. Sorry Cyn. I dug out one of her medium ruby crystals and held it to my chest, sighing in relief when it dissolved into light and flooded my veins. I really needed to get a bag so I could carry a stock of the things.

Taking a deep breath, I turned towards the door. I can do this, I insisted mentally. I will do this. Terrador was the only one back, and the two guardians couldn't do this alone.

One paw out the door, bring the other up next to it, steady breath. Every step made me more nervousâ€"had Cynder felt like this? No, she's stronger than that. I know she is.

I knew what Cynder would do. Drawing another heavy breath, I quickened my pace until I broke into a run.

The first death was more an accident than anything else. Before I could really think, my momentum had carried me into him. By instinct alone my tail flicked around me. I barely had the time to wrench it high enough, making sure it cut his throat instead of skidding over the broad armored chest.

He choked, eyes widening as he fell spluttering to the earth, convulsing for minutes before the choking breaths came to a halt.

When it sprayed, the blood was sickly warm. I shuddered but forced myself forward, gingerly stepping over the corpse.

"I'm sorryâ€!"

The next ape that met me got claws buried in his chest, bathing my forepaws in gore. I made sure this one got a claw to the heart. Even if it dyed my paws redder, I hoped it would hurt less.

They wouldn't spare me, and if they chose this path they would have to bloody well deal with the consequences. It felt brutal and sadistic, but it helped keep my head straight. Helped me remember that they weren't like my parents and me. If they came to fight, they risked death. They would happily murder innocents, something we would never do. Evil has its price.

Claw to the back of the neck, blade of wind to the skullâ€| I lost count of the death I caused.

Grasping a small ape's hand in my maw, I spun, leaving an array of toppling bodies spread around me.

I wouldn't come out unmarred, that was for sure.

My tailblade sliced through another ape's neck as my ivory scythe reaped and tore another life away.

I was just glad none of the wounds were bad enough to add to my array of scars. At least not the bodily ones.

My legs shook beneath me as I plunged faltering claws into a fallen ape's windpipe and the sputtering started all over again. Twisting into a clumsy pirouette, another aped got bludgeoned by my spiked wing-blades.

I knew this night would add to my personal demon menagerie. The mental scars that just don't heal. Ever. My father's corpse; the sickening crack of a huge wing breaking; mother crying for me to flee, to save myself.

There was a point where I was pinned and I thought it was over, but when my family flashed into my mind, I growled. Bunching back legs, I thrust them up into the creature's belly as I sent a blast of wind from my forepaws.

I guess we all sort of have our own cross to bear, right? While it hurt and tore my heart to bloody tatters, my soul still knew I was doing the right thing. My parents' fate burned in the back of my mind as my maw snapped open to unleash a twister of wind-formed daggers. I could deal with this, maybe even easier than Cynder. Pity was hard coming when the same force had ripped my parents apart and left many of my scales a bloody mockery of what they had once been.

It wasn't that I wanted revenge; I wouldn't seek it in other circumstances. Didn't want it exactly, but I wasn't unhappy it came. Old fury lent my limbs strength and my heart a shield. My demons lent me strength now, and would as long as I fought beasts who worked for the monster that had left a ragged hole where my heart should be.

A great ape stood at the doorway, and I snarled.

Dad said he wouldn't fight for this very reason, said battle made the beast in even the greatest hearts stir for good. Anger and bitterness that never truly left.

I was racing forward fast enough that wind beat my scales as I bunched my haunches.

But if that was my cross to bear, then so be it. I hadn't chosen it, but who really does? Who really understands death until they're the administrator? The one who can't help but imagine the pain brought on with every blow. However long we hid, that realization crept up on me.

With a spring, silver claws came towards the beast's neck.

It had to end. If that was to be my life? Well then, so be it. All my pain put together didn't hurt me so much as the thought that it wouldn't ever stop.

A great hairy arm swung at me, and pressure exploded on first one side then the other as I was thrown into a wall.

As darkness slipped my mind away I just hoped that the first big ape I fought wouldn't be the last. Hoped I'd live long enough to make the difference I craved.

I barely felt it as my muzzle and paws were bound. Barely felt the swinging as I was carried away. I did feel the vertigo aiding my sore head to drown me in shadow.

29. ANGEL'S FOLLY

When I woke, I was calm.

â€|_What?_

I tried to raise my head blearily, but it was so heavyâ€| When had

someone decided to stuff my head with fog?

That didn't make sense either! Did it? When I blinked my eyes open, a soft golden glow pierced my retinas like needles. The edges of my vision were blurry, fading. Like some insane artist had mixed all the colors around and added way more white than was strictly necessary.

Blearily, I worked to open my eyes again. Oh, the glow was Sparx. That at least made some semblance of sense to my weary, discombobulated mind. But wait. His edges were all blurry and when I tried to look harder at him sitting on the edge of my nose, I noticed something distinctly off.

"Spâ€"" My voice felt strangled and taut. No, wait! That wasn't right either. A voice couldn't feel anything. For some reason this was hilarious, and I cracked up while trying to spit my question out. "Spanks! Why there twoâ€|you?"

The dragonfly hovered, turning around slowly. "What?"

"I say 'Spanks, why two you?" I tried to choke out. Hearing what I said, I burst into another rendition of 'insane-laugh.'

"Hey! Waitâ€"Cyn, what's wrong with you?'

"Cotton 'ttacked my brain, I thinkâ€|" The kaleidoscope that was supposed to be my vision twirled again, and I looked at my brother once more. "Kno' wha', Spanks? You look really good in pinkâ€| Should wear more o' it."

"Cynder?" his eyes were rounder than dinner plates. Timidly he held a hand out. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Erâ€|" I had to think on that one for a few minutes before I was sure I got it right. "Fourteen!"

"Rightâ€| Did your last meal taste normal?" Faint flashes of why he would ask that sparked in my head. Something about him going nuts after trying a lick of glowing mushroom juice.

"Yup! Taste like cactus juice!"

He eyed me strangely, "What the hell is a cactus?"

I could only shrug, "Dunno yet, some mushroom sorta cloud. Maybe it knows the cloud that tackled my head!" I nodded sagely, hard enough that I was sprawled on my side minutes after I had just stood. "Hope that one's friendlier!"

"Wait, Cyn?"

"Yeah, big brobro?" His look of trepidation proved he was getting more weirded out by the second.

"Is somethingâ€|weird in the air to you or is that just me?"

"Everything seems weird, Spanks. Still two you by the way. Glad you got 'noffer friend your own size."

"Can you please not call me that?"

"What, yer name? Too cool for it now, Spanks?"

His eye twitched, "Do you really not remember? My name is Sparx."

"Like said I! Spanks."

Golden palm met golden forehead. "Geez, Cyn, you're freaking me out. When it feels like I'm the most sensible one present, there's a problem."

It took me a minute to think of what to say, stroking my chin with one claw. "Hey, improvement first step to realization! Or some suchâ€|"

He glared, grumbling. "Ancestors, even when you're drunk you try to spurt out sage-ness. It really doesn't fit you, you know that?"

"Don't judge a cover by its book," I insisted, batting at my tail with one paw. It wouldn't stop moving! Growling, I jumped at it only for it to lurch out of the way. Trying to chase the darned thing, I ended up tripping over my own paws. When I tried to stand, I couldn't. Something was yanking on my tail and my head all at once.

"Owww," I whined, pouting. Sparx stared at me.

"What were you trying to accomplish with this?" He asked, grabbing my tailblade and jerking it out from between two of my horns. "Did you and your tail have an argument?"

"Dunnoâ€|" I answered honestly. "Maybe today can be the day of berating rear ends! Stupid tail!" I glared at the offending blade and tried to gather a green blast of earth in my maw. Nothing came, however, and my lack of elements left me to pout some more.

"Oh great mother ofâ€"" Sparx muttered to himself, slapping a segmented hand to his head. His gold brow was beginning to develop a splash of pink in the center. "Listen, hard as it is to try and be the sensible one here, shouldn't we be escaping? They must have drugged you somehow, do you get that?"

"Bugged? Why they need do that? I'm already bugged, you're always with me and you're one! I don't need more," I said fervently. "One's hard 'nough to deal with."

"Shoot me." Sparx growled to himself.

â€|

I woke up in a panic, shivering as I felt the heaviness in the air. Instinctively, I released a bout of air, forcing the foreign substance in my body out along with it. It wasn't the first time someone had drugged or poisoned me. A group of dragons had tried to 'purify' me on multiple occasions. Besides, I couldn't catch every assassin sent after 'The General' alone.

Masterâ€"no_. Part of me revolted. Malefor. He doesn't deserve any titleâ€"had drilled my power over toxin into me long and hard, and it had saved my life many times.

I looked down at where droplets of the intoxicating substance had gathered on the floor. Angel's Folly. I knew and could manipulate most substances with an adverse effect on the body or mind. Luckily, this certainly wasn't deadly, at least in these circumstances. But it came from one of the most deadly plants known to dragonkind, even being nicknamed Dragonsbane, Deathwillow and Blood Rose.

It wasn't deadly because it was poisonous, but it produced a liquid that evaporated in all but the coldest air. If a dragon or other large animal breathed it in they wouldn't remember how to fly or fight. Slowly forgetting themselves, some sources said they would merely stay until starvation struck and the willow gained nourishment from the unfortunate creature's rotting corpseinate es. Ancient lore claimed the trees had a sentience of their own, and would draw the soul away from the body. Claims of what happened next were varied as well; some sources claimed the supposedly intelligent tree took control of the dragon's body, others that the corpse itself became a new Deathwillow.

Few creatures lived long enough to see it for themselves without going mad. I wasn't sure what I believed myself. Anything was possible in our mad world. I was certain that the pollen itself would likely intoxicate and make any large predator unaggressive. There was less of it here, but enough to rob a dragon of its elemental abilities and likely intoxicate them.

I hoped Cynder was fairing okayâ€!

I glanced up and focused on the cell. "Apparently this place doesn't belong to the brightest minds of the centuryâ€!"

Who in their right mind would stick a hostile fire-breathing dragon in a wooden cell, even with the Angel's Folly?

30. BLUNT

Cynder could probably deal with this, even with my wound. But I couldn'tâ€"couldn't fight the horde of dogs; couldn't beat it.

But I refused to bow down. My gold tailblade sliced and clubbed as I leaped and spun, once more calling on the last traces of a feral heart.

Charging forward, I hooked a canine on my left horn. Wincing as I felt blood splatter and mar burnished gold ivory and purple scale, I swung. Shaking the small dog off, I launched it at a larger mutt. Falling into his comrade, the momentum sent both canines tumbling into the sprawl of enemies behind them.

Slashing a claw down, lightning arced forth and smote a blow to a canine heart.

Still, it wasn't enough. Tearing away at flesh and bone, ruby flame lashed out. But for each felled mutt, three took its place.

Then he came, the tall hound giving a few garbling words I doubted anyone could comprehend. One of his crazy birds cocked its head to me and sniffed. "I see you found your quarters in the recoverment wing unsatisfactory. You were going to have a week to rest off that injury of yours."

"Yeah, fool!" The other crowed. "But now since you escaped like the fool you are, we won't bother! You can go screw yourself in a fight for all we care."

The beast fell on me, and I barely dodged the first swipe of the hook. The second was too much, aimed "probably intentionally" at my wounded haunches. I'd managed to dodge the smaller dogs, but their captain's swings were well aimed and accurate. I should have waited, waited until my limbs had their strength returned, waited until the damn burn had healed and didn't bleed at the slightest brush.

The third blow slammed into the side of my forehead, engulfing my mind with darkness.

â€|

Where am Iâ€|?

I could barely move, and it wasn't from exhaustion. Something was wound around my ivory paws, tail, wings, and to add insult to injury, even bound my scarred muzzle shut. Added to that, even with the little bit I could move, I had some sort of thick cloth holding me in. Something was wound around my eyes as well, so I wouldn't have been able to see even if I was out of my bonds.

"Why be so careful with a mere raider party?" The common-tongue warped and warbled in the thick tones of an ape. "What could they have of value?"

Were we still at the temple? Had the Guardians been overcome?

"You never know, it's better safe than sorry." That wasn't an ape's voice. It wasn't the voice of anything I knew of, and I couldn't think of anything allied with the apes that was intelligent enough to talk.

"Hunter, we don't have the time."

My eyes widened and I twitched involuntarily, shifting my woven prison. That voice had the rich quality of a dragon's, steady as the realm itself. What was a dragon doing talking to apes?

Why?

"Shade, that sack there." Hunter's voice was calm, but his words sent shivers up my spine.

"Aye." The other voice was tired, and I felt warm paws through thick linen. "I think we have a live one here, smallest enemy I've ever seen. Must have hidden."

The prison lifted, and light flooded in before I was turned upside down and shaken harshly. With a muffled growl, I squinted as soon as I had access to air. A wing twisted around me, sharpened, and slashed

my bindings away. Lifting my head and snarling, my worst nightmares were confirmed.

"Or not," an ape muttered humorously.

A medium sized almost-black dragon garbed in blacker armor stood next to a stocky feline figure, and behind them was a line of ten or fifteen apes.

Crouching, I wound the wind into a small tempest of blades around me as rage twisted my gut. "Traitor!"

How could another dragon betray the world? Really betray it, unlike Spyro's unwilling crimes.

At first I thought it was the accusation that caused the monster's grey eyes to widen, and caused heavy haunches to hammer to the earth. If the creature's jaw fell further, it would have dug into dampened soil.

"_Myst?"

What would Cynder do?

Doing my best to conceal a gulp, I snarled. "Who's asking? Why are you with apes?" I wanted to back away from the very idea of another tainted dragon, or worse one who helped the Dark Armies by will. I wanted to turn and flee, but that was not what Cyn would do.

"You haven't aged a day!"

"Why don't you start making sense? I was trained by the Guardians." I narrowed my eyes, doing my best to conceal the bluff. "And I'm stronger than I look. Don't vex me."

Look at me, if I didn't believe I could do this how could anyone else? I was never a good liar. I couldn't stop my exhausted legs from trembling or force the burn of exhaustion to fade.

"That isn't the Myst I knew. Who are you?" His eyes seemed sad and almost confused, so far away.

"I don't know how you know me, but I am Myst. Always have been, always will be. Why. Are. You. With. Apes?"

"Both of you, calm." The strange feline didn't waste words as he strode between us, showing placating hands to prove they held no weapon. "It isn't what you think. No full race is evil. These are apes who used to be commanded by The General. His ferocity terrified and disgusted them, so they fled to the dragons, intending to plead for help. They found my companion and myself instead, and agreed to help us rid the world of the Dark Master's army. Some apes want peace as much as we do."

"Even if I believe you, that still doesn't explain how he knows me." I jabbed a paw at the dragon and regretted it immediately as my world spun and I almost lost balance.

"Myst, if you really are Myst, of course I know you. I've seen you around every time Esperanza and Midioth needed someone to watch you."

With slightly shaking paws, the obsidian black helmet that masked his face was removed.

Those same grey-blue eyes were revealed to have a red outline, and on the bridge of his muzzle rested a bright red x-shaped marking. My eyes darted once more over chiseled dark grey scales, teal horns and a spiked tail, now in recognition. I had seen him around whenever I left our little ivy-decked cave, seen him as a gangly teenager as he rested in that cave, whining about this dragoness or that dragoness, whining about always being forced to watch the hatchlings, whining about not being allowed into the adults' meetings. He claimed I was the only hatchling who had any trace of sanity whatsoever.

Personally, I had always thought he had more insanity than the lot of us put together.

"Kuro?" My voice was laced with disbelief. "I thought you died with everyone else."

Much as it had been for the old sitter, the surprise was more than my exhausted brain could deal with. Butt hit ground with a plop as I did my best to keep my jaw hinged and attached properly.

"You think you're surprised? How the hell are you alive? I heard your family was slaughtered by the Sky Tiger."

I blinked. "Sky Tiger? You mean the General?" Pain lanced into my heart. "Yeahâ€!"

"I'm sorry, Shade," the cat turned a spotted hand to my old sort-of friend. "We can't stay here. We need to find somewhere safe to spend the night."

"Yeah," an ape huffed, garbled voice deep and throaty. "Little dragon come, see apes not always fight dragons."

Why not call him Kuro? It's his name. "I can't, I need to get back. Ignitus and Terrador are probably worried."

Kuro's eyes widened. "Ignitus and Terrador? The Guardians of earth and flame? Terrador's supposed to be trapped and hidden away by The General, and no one knows what happened to Ignitus."

"Well, a friend busted Terrador out. Ignitus has been helping her, and please don't call him The General to his face if you meet him. You'll only depress him." I was tired enough not to see the obvious flaws in saying this without explaining about Spyro, and definitely deserved the odd looks I got.

"Er, Mys?" That old nickname, no one else ever used it. "Did you hit your head when you were captured?"

I sighed. "No, what I just said makes perfect sense. If you and the Hunter bloke want to come with me, I'd like that. It's probably better the apes stay away until Iggie and Terrador hear they're friendly."

I was being terribly abrupt, and I knew it. I was covered in a splattering of blood, had been trapped in a sack for an unknown

number of hours, had just killed for the first time and done it disturbingly well, and my head hurt. A lot. I massaged my forehead with one paw.

Cynder's story had made something painfully clear, and my brief experience now confirmed every word.

War _sucks._

(A/N. I despise this chapter. No idea whyâ€|)

31. GOOD ENOUGH

With the best intentions in the world, I couldn't have led the others to the temple and stayed awake. Kuro and the weird cat insisted we spend the night at their camp, and with trembling feet I couldn't argue. By the time we were halfway there, I was dizzy and tripping over my own paws.

The ape who'd talked before was eyeing me, and it sent shivers down my spine. Glancing over what to a dragon were warped features, I hadn't a clue what was on his mind. He looked a little different from other apes I'd encountered. He was somewhere between the small and large kinds, with grizzled grey-brown fur and piercing amber eyes.

I studied those eyes carefully, searching to find something I could understand. They were so different from a dragon's, and yet something about the furrow of his brow seemed almost recognizable. Concern? For me? I looked at my paws self-consciously. It reminded me eerily of how any protective dragon would look at a hatchling, like dad and the other fathers in the village would look at kids that weren't their own, but none-the-less they cared for.

"What's your name?" I asked, feeling like I needed to say _something_. Feeling a little guilty that being so close to him and the others was legitimately frightening. They were intelligent, and it wasn't right to blame them for others' follies.

"Name Roreth Thistleheart." He studied me, and I knew those eyes were as intelligent as a dragon's or anyone else's. "Friends call me just Thistle."

I didn't really know how to reply, looking into those strange eyes. "Am I your friend?" It was probably hopelessly blunt and a little rude, but it was the best my tired brain could come up with.

"I like that." There was something warm in those eyes, something gentle. It reminded me of that light that had never left dad's eyes.

"I'd...like that tooâ€|" I couldn't hide the touch of uncertainty in my voice. How could I?

"I here you uncomfortable, I prove I can be friend. Throatha know I wary of dragons once. Thought Master and dragons all same. Was very wrong."

"Throatha?

Broad shoulders shrugged, "Ape Goddess, like your Ancestors but different still. Goddess of fight for right reasons, felt like lost sight of her 'til we came here. Dark one not follow promise, cast spell on apes." He grimaced, showing yellow teeth. "They still would fight for him anyway, but now more brutal. Changing who we are. Dark magic, like Master, only reason we never change is Master pick us for his elite guard. Unlike dark one he rely on fear, not spell. We thought he wrong, we run. Hunter and Shade kind to us, like Master should be. We help end war, want free apes. Want peace, want to go back home."

So many questions spinning around an exhausted mindâ€œ I chose a smaller one, I could ask the others when I was less tired. "Do you know why Kuro's going by Shade?"

The ape shrugged broad shoulders once more. "Not know Shade not name. Maybe change? Ape change name if want to, though can hurt parent feeling. Rare."

I shrugged as well, causing exhaustion to scorch my stiff shoulders. "I really don't know. I don't really know much about dragon custom outside the village."

Or in it, either. Guilt twisted my stomach as I looked towards Kuro. A whole way of life; hatchlings, adults, elderly. How can we be all that's left? Faces flickered feebly in the back of my mind. Faces I never bothered to commit to getting to know. Names danced on the edge of fading memories, quirks and personalities.

It took me a minute to notice Kuro was now beside me, eyes studying me. "He killed them all; all but me. The hatchlings, their parents. But you talk like he's a friend."

When'd he turn psychic? This wasn't the gangly teenager I'd known, not at all. His face was wizened, his body strung with thick muscles that rippled his scales with every step.

"What happened to you? I never thought you could beâ€œ like this."

"Like what? An adult? I never thought I'd see sweet little Myst covered in others' blood."

I shivered, glancing over the sick crimson-brown stains that riddled snowy scales. "Yeah, me either. I wish most of this never, ever happened. But that's why we have to fight, right? So it doesn't just keep happening until nothing worth anything is left."

"Now that's the Myst I know." The edge of his mouth quirked with the hint of a smile. "You've been trying to be someone you aren't all day."

"I need to fight! I can't fightâ€œ!" I didn't get it myself, but obviously he did.

"So you're trying to be someone who can, kid. But that just doesn't work. If you can't look someone in the eye and cut their throat yourself, their demons will haunt you for life. You're strong, confident, things I don't remember seeing in you. But if it isn't still you underneath it all, what's the point?"

"Urg, when did you start to make sense? No offence, but nothing you said used to sound even vaguely intelligent."

"You're doing it again, hiding yourself because you're uncomfortable. Who on earth have you been around to make you like this?"

"Like what?"

A rough paw slapped a weathered face, and I realized he hadn't completely grown up. His legs still looked way too big on him when his chest armor was off, and the realization quirked one end of my mouth into a smile.

"You're trying to act tough, but it isn't you." His eyes softened when hurt flashed across my face. "No, kid. I don't mean you aren't tough, but you should be tough like only you can be. Not anyone else."

"I'm not me?" I tilted my head to one side in confusion.

A grunt met my ears and he muttered something that sounded like "hatchlings." Which seems a bit hypocritical to me, given last I'd seen him he'd been twice my age and had less common sense than a Skavenger puppy with a bad concussion.

"Remind me to never, ever try to be a guardian," Kuro grunted. "Too much teaching. Listen, Myssy, who do you look up to the most?"

Oh ha-ha, that pun, again? "My friend, Cynder."

"Aha, and what's she like?"

I blinked, "Funny, strong-"

He held up one paw. "Exactly. And you're trying to be her. But you aren't her. You're you. Ever think that, maybe, that's enough?"

Is being Myst enough?

(A/N: I sorta failed to explain well last chapter what happened to Myst. So, here's the gist: Myst got captured, then Kuro's gang killed the bad apes, were looking for anything in their camp that mattered, and found our little Myss Myst. (Terrible pun is terrible-I know! XP)

~GGN~

32. THE BLOOD ON YOUR PAWS

(A note about the next few chaptersâ€"I'll be splitting up arena fights even though they are not happening simultaneously. Also, keep a look out for a character my good friend Dardarax has leant meâ€"thanks, Dard!)

I was shackled and dragged, a muzzle snug around my snout as I struggled. I'd quickly proven my past theory wrong. Skavengers did not need the Angel's Folly, it was a mere convenience. They were quite capable of pulling a purple dragon along when they wanted

to.

"Might as well save your strength," one of the birds sneered. "You'll need it."

They were right. Wincing at my injured pride, I shut up and walked calmly. My violet eyes stayed locked on two of the four who held my chains in case they slipped up.

Even as the General, chains had scared me, bringing up the faintest memory I had. Of small paws bound in obsidian, of green flickering venom, of smothering shadow, and of a timid hatchling's cry turning deep and feral as it grasped up to the twin moons.

Was that my last and only moment of freedom? Was that all I ever had? Somehow, I didn't think so. A deep part of me remembered a furred paw stroking my head as a strange archaic lullaby carried me to sleep.

But whoâ€"if anythingâ€"and what could that paw have belonged to? Apes had furless hands and, to my knowledge, nothing working for the Dark Master had paws.

Creaking wood snapped me back to reality as a gate creaked open. Before I knew what had happened, I'd been freed and shoved through.

I was in a great coliseum. Wood bleachers stretched around a circular floor.

"Scoundrels and sorcerers, thieves and pirates, we present to you the definition of terror himself!"

A cacophony of pleased hollering met the announcement.

"The cancer of the Dragon Realms, scourge of his own speciesâ€" the hollering increased. I glared.

"The Bloody Ace, the Sky Tiger."

I winced. I'd be happier never to hear those names again.

"And up against him, the blazing trio! You've seen them, you know them! They've bathed our floor with carnage countless times! Give a good welcome to the star-bright ones themselvesâ€"The Crimson Sisters!"

The creatures that stalked in were strange. Feline-esque, coats of ruby, copper and yellow sparkled like flame. Studying them, it took me a moment to realize those sparkling eyes were harder than they should be. Gem-hard.

Eyes of stone studied me closely. A pair of emerald, a pair of sapphire and a pair of amethyst.

Soft beats circled me as gentle lithe paws drummed on wood.

"I don't want to fight you," I tried to reason. My haunches hurt like heck and I'd heard whispers of elemental beasts, not unlike the living tree. A price had come when the dragons added their own magic

to the elements, giving bits and pieces of the elements life themselves. Beings without moral, pain or fear, twisted into some sick semblance of life. Sometimes it would happen to a dragon's soul in a sense, a blaze of past power taking a majestic form with ancestors who wanted to live again far too badly.

I'd even heard of a great foe of the Dark Master who gave up his body to penetrate the walls and try to assassinate him. Needless to say, it didn't work. However, it did leave him weak enough to be defeated and thrown into Convexity.

I barely managed to duck the first smoldering blow. Fire flickered around ruby claws and scorched the tips of my horns as I lurched to the side.

"I tried." Power gathered in my gut before I spat a great arcing strip of lightning.

It passed through one feline, and my eyes widened. The raw power surged into the star-bright coat, and as it did, the illusion of fur melted away like ice in a volcano.

Three forms made of nothing but flickering fire crouched, hissing as ignited feet blackened aged wood and hurled smoke up to the heavens.

â€|

My first coherent thought was something like, 'God, how can he close his mouth with teeth like that?'

My next coherent thought came after studying the striped dragon for a few more bewildered seconds. Oh. He can't.

"Well, well," the dragon, if it could be called a dragon, snarled. "Didn't your preshioush mother effer tell you it'sh rude to shtare?"

"No, not really," was my shockingly polite reply. "I figured that one out for myself." My head felt far away, but slowly it was clearing just a little.

"Shtill working the drug out of your shyshtem? Almosht done? Good. Now I don't haff to wait."

Drug_? Food_? My head was getting steadily clearer by the second.

"Ash long as the blood ish thick and fresh, I haff nothing to complain about," the dragon said, its pale green eyes flickering over my form, its barbed tongue darting out to lick its muzzle. "At leasht I haff nothing to complain about now, it'sh been too long sinsh I had dragon blood, and such a pretty dragonessh'sh at that!"

That snapped me out of it. "Why, thank you."

It didn't take long to figure out why or what was going on, but I heard Sparx sigh in relief at my return to my vague semblance of sanity. The claws adorning my forepaws dug into old wood with a slight scratching sound.

Two high voices shocked me out of breaking down my opponent.

"You've seen him a thousand times and he never fails to disappointâ€"he who uses his own flesh and blood to earn his dinner!"

"Be mad to mess with him and you know it!" The higher-pitched bird cut in, earning him a slap from the wing of the other.

"The undefeated champion, Travix the dragon!"

"Anticlimactic!" I screeched at the birds, irritable. Guess whatever they put in me wasn't fading as fast as it should. A few shakes of the head helped a little.

Enough to realize what I'd just thought. They'd drugged me! Turned me into a blithering idiot.

Consequences be damned, I threw my head up, lips crawling over pearly teeth. Warmth blossomed in my gut as I threw a great ball of smoldering flame at the pedestal where the great dog stood.

"Ah, ah, but little dragonsh." The other black form was there in an instant, batting one paw at the fire and sending it back at me. "Your fight ish with me."

Growling, I glared and finally took in the thing. He looked like a black dragon, save for a few things that didn't fit at all.

His bloodstained canines were long and large enough that he couldn't close his mouth, hopelessly garbling his speech. His eyes were an eerie greenish white, he had a pair of furred ears behind a row of horns, and he had markings that managed to look like rippling blood all over black scales.

"What the hell are you supposed to be?" I grumbled in my best attempt at sounding unimpressed. It failed pretty badly. Something about this dragon was just plain wrong. Like reality was having a seizure and decided to spit this thing out.

My eyes widened when I saw the paw he'd used to bat my fire away. The whole paw was dyed a sick reddish brown.

The brown of drying blood. The stuff had hardened, turning claws into fierce spikes.

"Ancestorsâ€|"

"Shaffed thish from dinner yeshterday, you know." Pale eyes studied the paw I couldn't help but stare at. "Tastesh nasty anyway."

Sick eyes glimmered as he turned his gaze to me, "But I'm shure you'll tashte jusht fine. Sho young and oh sho shweet."

33. YOUR EERIE EYES

"You know that you're one sick dragon, Bloody?" I growled, gathering flame around my paws.

"Oh, you have shpunk. I like that in a dragonesh, you know!"

"Hey! That's my sis you're messing with!" I blinked as a gold speck flicked forward. It took me a minute to realize it actually happened--but yes; a tiny fist clenched and struck the black dragon in the nose.

I didn't know who was more startled. Me, Sparx, or Travix. And thus, the start of the 'fight' began with two dragon's and one dragonfly's mouths hanging inches from the floor.

"Did your little pet jusht--punch_ me?" He looked more surprised than mad, to be honest. "And how the hell did that actually hurt?"

Sparx might have been tiny, but somehow he managed to have a mean sucker punch, one of the many mysteries of the dragonflies I'd yet to work out. I shrugged. "If I knew, I'd not tell you."

Pale eyes fixed on Sparx's flashing form. "You're velcome to be an appetisher ish you choosh to shtay there."

Sparx split quickly, leaving me to shake my head as the crowd booed at the lack of fresh blood.

"You know, I don't really want to fight you, sick as you are, you're one of the few dragons I've ever met," I said conversationally, emerald eyes studying him closely. It was hypocritical, but I didn't want to kill him. Not a dragon, not like this. Not for entertainment's sake. Not at all.

"Heh, what a hypocrite. I've heard of you, 'nesshy. You killed almost effery ape in Concurrent Skies. Not to mention anywhere elshe--ish killing them okay to you, then?"

Pain lanced across my chest, "You're calling me a hypocrite, murderer?"

"Nah, you care at leasht about your own kind. I jusht don't. Needed blood to liffe, needed to kill for blood. Shimple ash that. Caring hurt too much, sho I didn't let myshelf. They called me a monshter, sho I became one."

Did I imagine a twinge of regret hidden in pale eyes?

"Heh, a lot of the town I grew up in thought I was one, too. Don't see me whining about it, do you?"

"Well, did you haffe to eat them?"

"Well, do you have to? You were whining about not having dragonblood, right? Well, even if plain old animal blood wouldn't work, we're all sorta in the middle of a war right now. Why not use that blood. Sick as that would be, it's better than needless murder in my mind."

Pain lanced in those eerie eyes, and this time I was sure I saw it. Pain--and grief? Maybe, maybe even shame.

I could also see as, slowly, thin patience snapped. "I'm not

intereshted in your piffy, nesshy." Around his forepaw, dried blood flowed and reformed like it was liquid again. Half of it flowed first to the ground then to his other paw. "I'm hungry, thatsh what really matters."

And then he lunged, making the bloodlike stripes dance upon his midnight-black form.

I barely dodged the black blur by throwing myself up and over. Aiming a fire blast downwards, I landed on my forepaws and spun my tailblade behind me.

Nothing. The white blade clicked the ground, but that was all.

"Neffer turn your back on me." Shockingly strong forepaws slammed into my shoulders until my belly scraped the ground. Hot breath danced across my neck. "I'ffe been doing thish since before you vere born, nesshy."

Then the weight was gone, and a blur moved to stand before me. "Get up. I dishlike boring fights."

He could have killed me ten different ways in that second, but he didn't.

"What?" I spluttered as I lifted my sore belly from the ground. "Bit of honor in you yet, Bloody?"

"No, I jusht hate boredom." He pranced over, flicking his bald tail-tip across my cheek.

Eyes hardening, I slipped into dragon time and brought my teeth clicking down on that bald tail-tip. His blood tasted strange, like cold steel on a chilly night. Eyes narrowed, I bit down. Flashing out of dragon time, I threw my body into a tumble.

The dragon let out a strangled roar and tore his tail, new bone-deep cuts and all, out of my grasp. "_Shit_. Vhy you little _rat_â€| Let me show you jusht vhy that lucky shot vas a fery bad ideaâ€|"

Blood formed around his tail, spiking up and fanning out. Resting on his once bald tail was a V-shaped array of baked-blood spines to match his horns.

He took a moment to investigate his new acquisition, bearing an insufferable air of satisfaction.

Before I knew what was happening, one of those spikes was flying at my heart. Drawing air in, I desperately slipped into the little time energy I had left.

Ice formed around my paw as I lifted it andâ€"barelyâ€"deflected the spike. It sheered through the ice and nicked my paw, drawing a bloody line across small black scales. Eyes wide, I backpedaled as I slipped out of dragon time. Raising my wings, I cupped the wind and threw myself into the moon-soaked air.

Meanwhile, Travix was staring. "Vas that_ ice_? Not fire?"

"Oh, yeah, about that. Guess you could say I'm special." Smirking, I sent a shadowy spear of breath towards the floor. Sinking in, it exploded in a wave of shadow. Enveloping bloody paws, it surged up and writhed around him like vipers.

"You have two choices," I snarled, lighting down in front of him as my shadows hardened, snaring his legs and tail. "Give up, or die."

"You're veally into thish idea of redeeming me, aren't you? Vhy?" His saber teeth were caked with years and years worth of dried blood.
"Vhy?"

"Because your story reminds me of someone I care for." Ice formed against one claw as I lifted it to his throat. "Now, one question. Are you ready to die yet?"

34. HONEY, I THINK I BROKE MYST

Flickering fire lashed out, and I barely dodged. The great cat studied its own claw lazily before flicking a spiked tail. Though mute, the beast's glare spoke volumes.

_ 'Pathetic.' _

Ruby lips drew over ivory fangs in a snarl that tore my eardrums apart.

Then the other two were on me. An insubstantial claw flicked over my left wing, scorching it as it went, and I couldn't help the fear-flooded growl that tore from my throat. My eyes widened when the attack actually worked on the imperial felines. Eyes that couldn't widen paled and great fiery hackles exploded outwards.

My voice rose in pitch as fiery-red orbs burst forth from oblivion. The masses of fear circled me once, twice, before exploding outward and hitting home in yellow flame. Irritation caused my feral side to snarl when the orbs passed right through the spectral beings.

Lightning, flame and embodied fear had had little affect on these creatures.

Growling, I shot ice next. The icicle slipped through the creature, melting as it went, and splattered as a puddle on the floor. The yellow cat hissed as a hole riddled itself through fur that wasn't even there at all. It healed all too quickly, fire glowing red before knitting itself back together.

I'd forgotten the other two, focused on the copper flame. Another searing flick caused an arc of pain up my tail as I spun around.

They might have been cats, but they circled as wolves. Their eyes were chilling, icy, predatory crystals amidst roiling flame.

Those eyes were unimpressed, a bone chilling playfulness tumbling in their depths. Suddenly, smoke exploded, arching from forepaw to forepaw. It fell to the ground like water, pooling black like

oil.

Three snarls rang in the cold air as flame crawled across oil. A great flame reared its head from the oil, circling like a serpent. It exploded up into a burning cage that began to contract. The air burned like lavaâ€"and, believe me, I'd know. Not the most comfortable experience.

Desperate, I focused on the faint wind around me. It cooled my skin and comforted me as I forced myself into the air. Icicles spiralled around me before shattering into spines of glittering crystal water in the heat. Splashing to the ground, the water dripped across dry wood.

What I didn't expect was the trio of terrified shrieks. Fiery forms ran desperately from the flood, paws evaporating and then barely appearing again to carry them on.

Eyes widening, I let a silver beam explode from my maw and over the scorched floor. Oil crawled under water like blood when the cats evaporated, their dying shrieks ringing in my ears.

â€|

The cave Kuro had been staying in was huge. The walls were dark and the sandy bottom dry and thick.

What I never thought to see were two balls of fluff tumbling in the sand. One was white as my scales, the other a light birch-wood tan.

Neither did I expect the twin mangled yells of "Shayde!" or the two puffballs continuing to slam into said friend's chest.

"Azuri, Bramble!"

My wide eyes blinked. "Wha..."

"Zuri, Bram!" The seriousness I'd not had the chance to grow used to was gone. "Want to meet an old friend of mine? Remember what I told you about my old village?"

"Buht I thought you wudn't swee anyone from there again, 'cause thew awll had to leawve?"

Studying the creatures, I was shocked when I realized what they had to be.

_Baby. Fluffy. Apes. _

For a minute, as Kuro spun some kid-friendly tale, I had not the power to move except to plop my tired butt to the ground.

Of all the things I'd prepared myself for since waking from a ten-year-sleep, those unbearably cute balls of supposedly previous-enemy fluff was not one of them.

Does not compute...

I was snapped out of a confused reverie by a pawâ€"hand?â€"on my

shoulder. The tan one was in front of me, cocking a small head.

"Diwd you bweak all'a-suwdde, Dwagon?"

Seeing that face, pain twisted my stomach apart before the world was flooded with black.

35. STANDING AT THE CROSSROADS

"Vell, I don't know. Are you?"

One ebony paw ripped through my shadows like paper and continued. My eyes widened as it slashed across my shoulder and pulled back to his mouth, pushing my paw away with a strength unfitting to a dragon of his stature. His tongue flicked out and licked the paw clean—"both of his own blood and my own.

As he shook shadows off like dirt, I desperately backed away, once more gathering fiery power in my maw.

I was never able to cast it.

"Oh, vell now I don't think sho."

His pale irises seemed to glow, snuffing out his pupils and the whites of his eyes before taking on a strong glow. In contrast, red mist wrapped around one paw as he lifted it.

A shiver jerked up my spine.

Something was very wrong.

The glowing paw jerked down, smashing a small crater of wood into sawdust.

My body was forced to the ground like I'd been tackled. It was like my blood itself yanked my unwilling body along for the ride.

"You're a fool, you know that?" Stiff claws turned my head to the side and drew a shallow bloody line across the scales of my throat. "You veally think I didn't exshpect that? Vhatever ish vrong vith your elementsh, you certainly look like a shadow 'neshie. I shorta vonder vhat the anceshtors vere thinking, shaddling a little nesshie like you vith a power only the purple should have."

Though it seemed my very blood was in the mid-war stage of a revolt, I managed to choke out a question.

"You kn-know why I can use the other elements?"

"Know? I've shpent my life resharching shorcsey. Of courshe I know. Booksh dragonkind'sh preshoush eldersh and gaurdiansh wouldn't look at, 'caushe it'sh tradition not to." The dragon snorted. "'The anceshtors forbid it.' Peh."

He was pacing now, blood-made tailblade swaying from side to side. The crowd was cheering, seeming to enjoy the drawn-out death they had to be sure would happen. Gritting my teeth, I tried to stand. Not

happening. It was like my sluggish blood had hardened into cement. Continuing to strain, I got a single paw to twitch. Yeah, that would totally help.

The bloody dragon's hold seemed to be lessening slowly. Maybe, maybe if I kept him talking long enough...

"Then tell me, please." I couldn't hide the faintest note of begging in my voice. According to the prophecy, I was wrong. According to everything I'd learned in the dragon temple's library, there was no way I should exist.

"And where would the point be in that? Sho you could know right before you die?" He was out of my line of sight now, the slight click of claw on wood drawing nearer sending a chill up my spine.

"It'sh shad veally. Sho much life in you..."

I heard Sparx cry something, but it was far too far away to make out...

Pressure exploded against my head as the world was lost to night.

â€!

When the blackness began to fade to white, I began to worry. I'd seemed to have worked myself into an unwilling habit of getting knocked outâ€"but this was different.

I didn't doubt that the dragon was capable of killing me.

And the thought of dying scared me. I couldn't imagine there was anyone it didn't scare.

And yet it seemed like the only possible thing that could be happening to me. It felt like my body was fading away and leaving a cheap imprint behind. I could feel a wind in this blank dreary place. I could feel it going right through me...

"I'm not ready to die yet..."

"No one ever really is." A sleek shadow draped over me as a long neck drooped. A cool muzzle pressed against my forehead. Turning a disbelieving head, I couldn't hide the tears when they came.

"Kaboa." I stepped forward and leaned my shivering form against her chest. "Am I really..."

"I don't know."

"How?"

Her forelegs wrapped gently around me. "Sometimes, if someone is unconscious and their life depends solely on another's choice, their soul can brush against those who have already left their own life. If the spirit in question holds enough power. Especially if you're somewhere that meant a great deal to that spirit at some point."

"So. I'm helpless here. What do I do?" I could tell how obvious the strain in my voice was.

"You're going to hate the answer. Only thing you can do is wait. Time stretches differently here, so I can't even tell you how long it will take."

I sighed, forcing calm to wash over my body. "So, why the heck is this hellhole special to you? I mean, I've been drugged, beat bloody, imprisoned and insulted in what I assume is the last day."

"I used to have a friend here, I grew up hereâ€"and this is where I met someone else very important to me."

"You grew up _here?_" The disbelief was heavy in my voice.

"Yes, it wasn't always as bad as it is now. It's a long, long story I doubt I have the time to tell. But it was all worth it when I finally made a friendshipâ€"or moreâ€"that could last a lifetime and beyond."

"Ooh, did somebody get a crush?" I poked a claw at her, weak smirk tugging my mouth.

She looked at me for a few seconds, only to start laughing.

I blinked. What the?

"I don't get it." I whined tiredly, tipping my head to one side.

"Call it irony or something, I promise I'll tell you when you get where you're going if you haven't figured it out by then."

"Thanks,_ mom_," I growled sarcastically, stealing a line Sparx had used on me on more than one occasion. "You're ever so helpful."

My quip was met with silence. Then Kaboa whispered somethingâ€"was that regret in her voice? "Something's happening. You're going back."

Color flooded my white world, and I shivered when it began to darken to black. Fog rolled in, blurring my senses. A fog I recognised. I muttered a word that made my disapproving guardian box me on the shoulder with a wing. I turned a now groggy head to see an odd, far off look the eloquent dragoness' emerald eyes. Why were they so sad?

I don't understand...

36. NAMED FOR A SNEEZE

I was running.

The wind that beat against white sweat-soaked scales chilled me to the bone.

I glanced back, unsure of what I was running from. Red eyes on a pale

form served as an unfriendly reminder.

Wait.... The spectral white blur ghosted towards me. Why did it sound so familiar?

The demon that spoke with Cynder's voice was level with me now, pale green underbelly brushing underbrush that hadn't been there seconds earlier.

I almost ran into thin air before a paw slammed on my tail and jarred me to a halt.

Forcing a growl from my throat, I spun to face her. "Who are you?"

Still pretending to be her, I see. Well, you're not. If you were I would slit your throat. You can do what she cannot. I have come to beg you. When the time comes, don't do it. You're worth more than either.

I barely caught those words. Her body was sleek, her muzzle hooked, and she wore a dark grey choker and anklets. The horns that were on her head and the scythes on her wings and tail were shaped like Cynder's, but black as tar.

"_What_ are you?"

A shadow wishing for death, that which is left abandoned for the sake of another. A shade from the future come to change fates.

Ruby eyes glimmered like fire as I backed away. The blindingly white dragon didn't look like a shadow to me.

We are more similar than you yet know. Though, in a way, my fate was forced on me and your heart led your own to you. Then again, it also led me to mine.

I shivered, trying to lift my wingsâ€"but they wouldn't move. Not an inch. My heart led her to her fate? That made no sense to me.

You are my doom, yet I can never fault you for it. As she could never fault you for it. Grow well, grow right, and grow less selfless. Cause not my death, that of an innocent stranger, and cause not your own.

"Who are you?" I shivered.

I am Symmer. I am all that's left when the fire fueled by love has consumed everything and left nothing.

—••—

When I woke , echoes from a dream I couldn't quite remember rang through my head. Groaning, I lifted my head only to let out a loud shriek of fear at the furred face that loomed not ten feet away.

It took me a moment to calm down, realising it was an old female apeâ€"in a rocking chair.

A rocking chair? Really? I blinked a good half dozen times to make

sure I wasn't imagining things. Sailors of the many races had often stopped at the old island sanctuary, and they'd brought their odd share of nicknacks with them. Chairs, carpets, yarn, wool, wood, toysâ€"my stomach ached at the memory of my little baggie of marbles. The little stone and glass beads had meant so much to me. And now they were just...gone. Like everything and everyone else.

"There is far too much pain in you for one so young," an old crackly voice wheezed. I looked up at the ape-ess? What was a female ape even called? Her voice was flimsy as a feather, but it sounded sturdy too, somehow. Like an old weathered oak tree.

"I guess so, yeah." I looked at my forepaws somberly.

"What is your name, small one?" The name didn't sound insulting, or even like an endearmentâ€"it just was, and it was true.

"Myst."

"I have a feeling it is quite the fitting name." Her weathered voice had a certain rhythm to it, like a song would. She was right, too. Ten years gone, lost to the mists; a hundred villagers that only Kuro and I could remember. Cynder had gone, leaving for a grove of poison mist. My very vision had been lost to a mist of darkness that clung to me like tar!

"Yeah, it is." My voice was closer to breaking than glass.

"Little one, mist is not only about losing thingsâ€"you could see it as what hides the future, what dulls the pains of the past. It numbs our pains and brings our weary spirits to rest when they are sick of this world with all its joy and all its pain. Without blindness, we would not give sight a second thoughtâ€"and few do."

My pale eyes widened, "_How?_"

"The way you move, how well you hear me when my voice is all but silent. It tells tales, little dragon. And I have seen the effects of our old master's venom. He gained his power over it when it was used on he himself. It was never his, always the dark one's. Not until it ran like green blood through his veins was he corrupted. I was one of few of his apes who pitied him for what he had become. He was small and sweet once, taken care of by a dear friend who was later his prisoner. He loved her like a mother, but after the toxin took effect I had to help her to flee from him."

"Who was sheâ€"what was she? An ape like you?"

"No, she was a rare black felineâ€"like Hunter. Her twin brothers betrayed her and are not worth mentioning. She ended up a prisoner to Malefor, and he used her to raise Spyro. She named him, and I helped her with olden Draconic. I had an old book on the subject. The first day we had him, he set her tail alight quite by accident with a sneeze. So, for his name we combined 'pyro'â€"or fireâ€"with 'spiro'â€"or breath."

>I chuckled, "Cynder is going to have fun with that one!"<p>

She shrugged, "It is ape custom be named for such misadventures. Rorath means 'stumble'; my grandson did indeed stumbleâ€"right off a cliff. He was given the name Thistleheart because he rarely opens up.

Also, he is bad at learning another's tongue or customs, and his mom once said getting through to him was about as easy as walking through a sea of thistle weed."

I laughed. "That's pretty bad, I bet he's never been fond of his name."

She shrugged, "For an ape, a name is a challenge. To improve who you are, to overcome your flaws. No ape looks down on another for their name."

I looked down, "What have I done? The few I killed, they had stories, they might have had families, homes, histories. I'm becoming everything I hated in the General..."

"Do not despair, child, your salvation lies in the reason we left—the reason we too will kill our own kind. The truth is in the nature of the curse cast on us by the Dark Master when our ancestors failed him. Somehow, if he returns, there will not be a race left to save. We do not know how, we do not know why—but we do know he plans to destroy us. We are not the only ones; war spreads death to all species, and it is worth the pain to end it. We owe it to you, to Azuri, to Bramble, and all the other little ones of the world."

Speak of the little devils and they will appear. On your back, out of nowhere. Pulling on your horns in little Azuri's case.

The Grandmother chuckled, "There are times I believe the two of you cheat all laws of physics. They were worried about you, white one. I had to guard you so that they would leave your side—they thought they hurt you somehow because you fainted right when they appeared."

"Er, you didn't hurt me," I said helplessly. Except mentally. A lot.

"Pway with us?" I was hit with two pairs of fluffy baby-ape puppy-eyes. Blue and amber. How did they even get their eyes that big?

Ancestors help me...

37. SHATTERING WALLS

I woke up, once again, to a thick blanket of proverbial fog coating my head. As before, I was far too out of it to care.

"Hey, purple boy, she's up," I heard Sparx's grudging voice.

Riiiiight, because sitting on an ocean is so up... I yawned wide and rubbed the sleep away from my eyes, too confused to wonder how the hell I was even alive.

"Cynder!" A voice sang—or was it yelled or whispered?—from the cellery next to me. Nooo, that don't make sense. It was different than before, scary. Something was wrong, so, so wrong. Fog chased me into confusion and I couldn't get out of it. Thinking hurt. A

lot.

"I'm lost..." Why-oh-why was that all I could think to say? Why didn't the world make sense anymore? I buried my eyes under my paws and whimpered quietly.

"She's up, man, but she ain't moving," Sparx said, grudgingly not adding an insult. "Whatever's in the air really doesn't agree with her."

"Cynder, I know some part of you can still make sense of the world around youâ€"there's a drug in the air called Angel's Folly. It's blocking your elements and making your thoughts disjointed. If you can, I want you to walk over to where our cells are separated and reach a paw through the barsâ€"can you do that for me?"

I felt like his words should make sense, I really didâ€"but how or why to carry them out was beyond my addled brain.

"Well," Sparx announced, "I have a feeling Cyn won't be touching wine or any other form of 'happy juice' as long as she lives."

Grumbling, Spyro sighed, "How on earth do you even know about alcohol?"

"Mushroom juice."

"I officially don't want to know."

"Then remind me to tell you later. For the moment, what can you do to help Miss Morning-After over here?"

I managed to get out a small pitiful growl that did me absolutely no good whatsoever. I didn't even know why it was a prudent time to growl, but I knew it was.

"She is going to eat you whole when she can, you know," Spyro muttered, shaking a purple head.

"Soooo worth it."

"Did I mention she'll have crystal-clear memory later?"

"Dammit..."

"Finally realized why I said be nice to her?"

"Yup."

"Good, now I want you to get her paws off her eyesâ€"the sun might make the headache worse, but we need to talk and I have to get the poison as cleared up as I can so it's possible. I need to at least touch her paw or tail for that, and I don't fancy your chances moving around her tailblade while she's too drunk to be careful about not crushing you."

"Yeah, no crushing please." I felt little hands tug my paw awayâ€"or try to. I didn't feel like helping for some reason.

"She won't budge them and one of them is heavier than me! Not much I can do..."

"Crud. Cynder, listen to me or I will have to ask Sparx to make you listen. I'm sorry. Please move."

For some reason dread was boiling in my stomach as I heard faint slapsâ€"was Spyro covering his ears?

"Now, Sparx."

"Swing low, sweet chariotâ€"coming forth to carry me home, woahoahoahoah!"

I groaned, voice terribly weak. "Sp-Spanks, must you do that?"

I imagined the two trading glances. "Maybe I do must I do that! And you know, it might just be crazy enough to work."

I would have been glaring were it not for the eyelids and paws in my way.

"Let the joy come pouring down, rain on you and meâ€"yeah!"

"Keep it up Sparx, I think it's working." Spyro's voice was sincere, if strained. Sparx sounded like a choir of dying cats.

"Hmph, Hmph Hmphâ€"can't you feel it? Can't you just feel the love in the room tonight?"

"Be merryfull and kill me now..." I struggled upwards, or tried to before tripping over my own feet. Twice.

"Do ya mean merciful, sis?" Sparx asked evilly as I finally got my paw through the ancestor's-damned gate. "Remind me to get you hungover more often..."

Spyro snorted as his warm paw pressed against mine. "Good luck with that. Personally, I like her normal."

I felt heat rush away from my head, fog forced to part so for one ancestor's-blessed moment I could think clearly.

I collapsed, shaking. It was like the fog had been the only stability there was. Everything hurtâ€"touch, sound, sightâ€"all my senses overloaded my system.

For the first time since we left home, I was sobbingâ€"possibly the first time in front of Spyro too.

"Shhh, shhh." The deeper voice was gentle as he squeezed my paw. "You didn't go through whatever the Scavengers have been using for withdrawal symptoms, but you're going to be okay, I promise. I overheard that we both will be in this supposed sick-bay for at least a week. We have a little time."

He was so gentle... I was so used to playing leader to our little rag-tag group of four that someone looking after me again was welcome, welcome relief. No offence to Kabbyâ€"but at least I could see Spyro out of dreamland. I squinted my eyes at him, and the scales

that weren't newly burned sparkled a thousand shades of amethyst. His eyes looked over me, and I felt safe, like home. I wanted to lean against him, maybe even hide under those gleaming wings and pretend the whole wide world was leaving us alone.

But I couldn't. I could only put one name to the foreign emotions— a name I refused to utter, drunk or not.

A purple paw brushed my cheek then forehead through the bars. I wanted to lean into it, but didn't. For a split second I thought it was something more—but then he sighed.

"It looks like you have a fever again, you're *hâ€"warm.*"

Nope, Spyro, wrong diagnosis...

38. BOYS WILL, INEVITABLY, BE BOYS

(I must love you guys. :P I usually wait for five reviews when I have a new chap done to post it, and I went through line by line in the FF editor to TRY and fix that ancestors-danged problem you've probably seen once or twice in LOC: jamming the story and killing line breaks for absolutely no reason. Hopefully it worked. If not I'll need River's (my absolutely amazing beta, if any of you don't know) help to fix it due to not having a good word processor.

While I'm on shameless promotions—GO READ LEGEND OF CRYSTAL by TLOSPYROGIRL, DARK LEGACY by DARDARAX, AND TEARS OF AN ORACLE/ RESIDUAL DARKNESS by RIVERSTYXX. The first needs more love—it inspired LOC to be born!—and TLO's B-day is almost here. Happy birthday! Residual Darkness got a bit of a reference a couple chapters back (anyone catch it? Not a word Sunny. Not. A. Word.), and as I've probably said before, our lovely vamp-blood dragon is from Dark Legacy. Oh, and also go read NO REST FOR THE WICKED by SHEMMI. While I haven't rekindled my interest in reading Spyro fics enough to read it myself, I know for a fact that Shemmi has a great head for writing. So go read next time you're waiting for me to get myself together and update... You might even spot my little white dragoness out there in the wide, wide world of fanfiction... :D

Now that the shameless promotions I might get yelled at about later are done, enjoy!)

* * *

><p>I lost track of how long I lay like that, Spyro's paw on my own. Long enough for me to realise how awkward it was, but not long enough for me to gain the strength of will to pull away. Not that I could. That contact was all that kept the drug's effect from mauling my little sanity.<p>

My tired mind was almost glad for the excuse.

"Vell, ishn't that jusht adorable."

"Travix," I growled weakly, peering out of the cell at the blood dragon.

"What on earth are you? Wait." Spyro's eyes narrowed. "I've met you

somewhereâ€"how?"

"If it isn't the old General himshelf." Pale eyes roved over Spyro, "What happened to you? Losht a bit too much weight there, Tiger?"

"I think it's just right, thank you. I think I remember you now. I'm..."

"Ah, sho you do rememberâ€"shorry, are ve?"

"Yes, though I am not the one who did it. The General is a part of me, but I was never a part of that monstrosity."

"Does somebody want to fill me in here?" Sparx asked, glaring at the other black dragon.

"No," was the twin reply.

"I hate to agree with lantern here, but what the hell are the two of you talking about?" I growled.

"There are many lives I destroyed, including his mentor, or who was going to be. Granted, I'm inclined to believe I was doing him a favor or that's what I think happened. My memories aren't terribly clear."

The black dragon shrugged. "I haffe every reashon to hate you. He vash the only von who didn't hate me for vhat I vas born ash. Shtrangly enough, I don't care. That choishe would haffe dragged me into the var. I like bloodshed, but there is a point when it vould be tiring. Not that I doubt I vould live, but it might be more effort then it'sh worth."

"So you scavenge in the discrete places where all the authorities are too busy fighting a losing war to check."

"Shomething like that."

"Wait," I said, "if you're out of a cage and unaffected by the Angel's Folly, why are you here?"

"I live here. They can hardly contaminate my blood with that crap, but it'sh eashy food. Lucky for you, you tashte like crap." Something in those eyes spoke a lie, but I was hardly going to look a gift dragon in the sabers, or at least not when stringing two thoughts together thoroughly murdered my head.

Spyro interrupted his reply with a snarl that vibrated the cell bars. "What do you mean she was lucky?"

He bared filed teeth, and if looks could burn Travix would be a pile of smoldering ash.

It was the angriest I'd ever seen the purple dragon, and he was focused hard enough that not even a lick of shadow danced across his scales. It was _terrifying._

And...it was almost flattering. Almost.

"Oh, shave me, mommy, I'm shooooo shcared." Travix rolled green

eyes.

"Regardlesh, I'm actually here doing you a favorâ€"sho I'd suggesht you take that ego and shoffe it right up your..."

"Shut up, both of you." I sighed as my head steadily cleared. "What favor? Why would we have any reason to trust you, bloody, and what's the catch?"

"In order: a letter shome poor fool vas trying to get you without catching the attention of the Dark Mashter's lovely little traitor here, you have no choishe, and that dependsh... You shee, I actually haffe a legitimate problem becaushe of you, Nesshie."

I snorted. "I feel so terrible for that, it's not like I've got any reason to dislike you or anything..."

"Yesh, awful, I know," he actually looked amused. "Howeffer, I am sheriou. I have a little bout a veek, and that, nesshie, is the only meal I get."

He did look a little warn.

"I need blood. Ov courshe, I could kill shomething on board, but that'sh a problem. I'm veak enough at the moment that I couldn't beat the imbeshilic captain, and they keep count of effery damn liffing thing on board. I need blood, but I alsho need something that'll liffe, but not shqueal on me."

I snorted. "And I would want to help you...why?"

I'd felt Spyro's paw stiffen around mine. He didn't really think I'd have even considered helping the brute, did he?

"Vell, for von, do you really vant me to shtarve? For the other, do you remember your little question?" His eyes narrowed. "I do, and I shtill know a bit about that anshwer..."

My eyes widened and my heart jumped. Answers... The reason for the elements, the reason Spyro's supposed destiny was mine in all possibility.

The answers no one knew, unless they refused to tell me. Anger rose in my gut, at Kaboa, at the Chronicler, at Ignitus. At anyone who might have known...

"Cynder," Sparx's whisper was far away. "I know that look. Don't you dare! You're already sick, and they're turning you into a freaking gladiator! You're tough, blackie, but even you have a limit! He proved that!"

"Sorry, but I need to know this."

"Maybe there's a reason you don't know yet, Cyn. Please, it isn't worth this." His voice was pleading and I'd never seen those eyes grow so big.

I turned back to Travix. "I'll do it."

"No." I turned to see amethyst eyes narrow. "I will."

"Spyro, no."

"And why not? You're worse off than I am; you already lost blood, I'm just burned. I also have all my elements while you don't. Simple logic."

"I say listen to him, Cyn. He's right," Sparx insisted grimly, looking at Spyro.

Damn, when did they get in enough guy time to stop arguing so much? This was so out of character it was creepy... Maybe it would pass when they decided I was done being stupid. Or done being more stupid than usual, anyway.

"I'm doing this, no one else." On my own head be it. "I'm not risking anyone else."

"I dunno." Travix eyed Spyro carefully, a eerie gleam in pale eyes. "You're right that she's weak, and I can't have any bodies lying around ash evidenshe."

"So... The two of you are implying that Cyn gets no choice here?" Sparx asked.

"Yesh."

"She's given me little choice."

"Sweet, I totally dig your style."

"I hate you all."

39. TWIN HEARTS

(A/N: A note on continuityâ€"

>As I noticed too late, and a few well-versed Spyro fans must have noticed, there's an error with the letter. Hunter can't have gone to give it to them because he hasn't started tracking them yet. When he goes, though, he'll be off the radar, the only real continuity spanning both groups' plot. Please ignore the timing error, and keep in mind that events aren't synced up. Thank you. :))<p>

* * *

><p>After an hour passed playing friendly games of hide and seek and tag, among other things, with a pair babyâ€"fluffyâ€"apes, I was prepared to nominate today as the most bizarre day of my lifeâ€"and I spend time with Cynder and Sparx. A lot of it. Still, it was fun and relaxing. And it was the only time I'd actually played with someone younger than me, a unique sensation in and of itself.<p>

Hunter interrupted the eighth or ninth game of 'tag-tail' I hadn't had the heart to refuse. "I have been talking to Thistle and Shade, and we were hoping you could help us. For months we've had to avoid both sides of the war, including any attempts to approach the Guardians since they have returned. However..."

"You think they'll listen to me. I'll try my best."

His eyes softened and he rested one padded paw on my shoulder. "Dragons can be an incredible folkâ€"your best may be just what we need."

"When are we going?"

"Whenever you are ready, young one. The attack must have done a sore number on you."

I nodded, smiling. "Let's go. Ignitus is probably really worried. Cynder might be back by now too! She should be, it's been long enough. Oh man, she's going to murder the Guardians when she finds out I'm gone."

On the trip back, I walked pensively beside Roreth Thistleheart and pondered what I could possibly say to Cynder to get her off the Guardians' backs for me being captured. I did stop to stare at finding Kuro, armor and all, bearing a rocking chair and an old ape on his back. She sat with limp wrinkled legs on either side of his neck, absently knitting something bright yellow. The rocking chair was behind her, tied to his strong back with thick rope.

I had to stuff one forepaw over my mouth to avoid cracking up at the sheer absurdity of it all.

Farther away, I saw an unusually reddish ape buckle and fall before struggling back to her feet. I paced to her side, wincing at the sheer magnitude of what they each had to carry. She was a bit smaller than any ape I'd encountered, and even the coloring on her face was bright crimson where the average ape had a dull red. The slight female turned grey eyes on me when I asked if I could help, and gratefully handed me a basket.

Seeing the apes as people terrified me.

Seeing_ these _apes as friends felt right. Righter than I could put into words.

I glanced back at the female, and noticed something I'd missed before. The front of her torso held a noticeable bulge. Now, I didn't know much about mammals, but I had a fair idea just what that meant. Moments later, I realised someone had rushed to her just as I had, and there he was now. Thistle took what remained of her load and shouldered it, putting one rough hand on her shoulder and murmuring a few soft words in the apes' guttural language. Seeing her nod tiredly, he smiled and moved his hand to her stomach for a mere instant before turning around.

I didn't have the chance to hide my look, and he raised one eye ridge. "Dragons start different maybe, but come from the same place in end. From love, from mother, from father. Did you think we any different?"

"Here." The ape took my paw and slid it under the bottom of her shirt, and a chill rose up my spine when I felt the skin ripple as water could. "He or she is feisty like their father, yes?"

Her green eyes danced, and I noticed a splay of orange freckles across her cheeks. I couldn't decide if I wanted to move my paw or

not; the thought of another creature inside of her was intimidating and beautiful all at once. Feeling the new life stretch and reach was indescribable, and in the end I had to ask if I could try hearing.

She agreed without hesitation, and I lay my head next to her stomach. I could hear it, barely—"twin heartbeats. Compared to the fresh life, all other sounds were thunder.

When I finally forced myself to continue on, my eyes were wide with a wonder I could never place. I deemed to walk beside her, and if she ever tripped I tried to help as best I could.

Not half an hour later, Volteer's nasally voice cut into my thoughts. "Myst? Scarper, post haste! You're in danger of grievous bodily harm standing there immobile!"

Volteer swooped down, gathering thunder in his paws. My stomach lurched when I realized just what he was planning on doing. Gritting my teeth, I launched myself forward and up. Flapping in front of him, I placed a paw on his arm.

"Vacate the vicinity, Myst! I am quite unable to disperse the energy with your paw resting on me unless you desire to be on the receiving end yourself."

Exactly the point. "Volteer, listen to me. It's not what you think—"these guys killed the other apes and saved my life. They aren't under the same magic, and they've let a dragon and cheetah lead them!"

"Preposterous. In all the years of this ancestors-cursed conflict, no ape has shown an ounce of moral." White and blue scales flickered in the sunlight. "But no dragon but the corrupted has shown such a lack of them as well, and you say they are led by one? Stand down, Volteer, and let us see what our guests have to say."

"Listen to you," I snapped, patience blowing away like mist in the wind. "In my village no one was turned away. Mom called that bias and told me it was wrong! We helped sick apes before, and they never told on us either. Maybe they look bad now, but if there's one thing I've seen it's that fighting makes everyone a monster! How many apes have we killed, how many lives lost in a storm of war? We can't blame them for doing what we do without blaming ourselves!"

When had this become such a big deal to me? When I'd seen the little babies not so different than I had been? When I realised how different it would have been if Cynder had found one of them in the Ice King's chest? What then? Would she have spared them; taken care of them; cared? I wasn't sure, and that scared me. They might have had a tough fate, but no matter what they were still people—"right?

"It's much more complicated than that," Cyril sniffed as Volteer sidled from paw to paw, looking a bit nervous.

"What the child is saying could theoretically prove more applicable than you insist, Cyril. Notice anything rather unique, irregular, about these particular apes? It is a rare occurrence indeed to encounter a group with none engorged by tainted darkness, and

therefore enlarged by it."

A snort was followed by an irritated, "Balderdash, apes die all the time, you know that. Most likely the dragon killed the leader and managed to take command. It is a shadow dragon and apes are not hard to fool. Perhaps he merely nudged the tainted shadows."

A long neck arched and a black and red head was beside me. Kuro sounded about as annoyed as Cynder would be, and for the first time his old immature self glimmered in those ruby eyes. "Is this ignoring thing common or have they just forgotten we exist outside of the hypothetical world?"

I shrugged. "Yes and no idea. Cynder spins it like you could start an opera next to them and those two wouldn't notice. Honestly... It wouldn't surprise me."

"Starting to understand the bad rep..."

"Huh?"

"Oh, in general most of the Guardians, especially Ignitus, have fallen into ill graces with the alliance. After a generation of eggs smashed, capture, failed battles, their leader hiding away, and most of all, letting the purple dragon into the enemy's clutches."

"That was the best thing he could do short of killing himself!" I growled. "He knew The General wanted them for something and he saw how he was being looked for!"

"Steady, these are not my views. As for others perhaps that is true, but good or not, people will be people. And people can be blind. They have deemed me a hero through rumor alone, quite unaware I have help. Quite unaware of the kind of help."

"I guess they wouldn't like you so much then, huh?"

"No doubt." He raised his head. "Excuse me?"

Shockingly, he was ignored.

"I would suggest going on without them, but that could be bad if they noticed." I sighed. "Cyril's probably gonna be the worst of them."

Raising my voice, I shouted best I couldâ€"yelling was not my strongpoint. "Where's Ignitus? When'd you get back? Are they alright?"

It was Volteer who finally registered that I'd talked. "They are fine, if extremely overtaxed and suffering substantial fatigue. In addition, It has become apparent, even obvious, that the Dark Armies no longer seek to murder Cynder and Spyro alone. It is apparent that they want them captured for a reason."

Cyril nodded. "And, in addition, we have not heard word of Cynder's whereabouts."

I flinched, eyes wide. "She's not back...?"

Beside me, Kuro saw my tail droop into the dust.

"No, and if the tales we've been told are anything to go on, she may never be. The dark forces have had the chance to amass, and Gaul himself has been said to have a plan to trap her. I am afraid of what terrors these plans might hold for us."

My eyes widened as I shivered at grim memories. "The trap with the raid! We have to find her!"

Both dragons nodded as one, faces grim.

A furred paw rested on my shoulder, and beside me Hunter studied the Guardians. "If you swear to give my companions the chance, I will find her. I have studied tracking with the best, and unlike one of your kind I will not be attacked on sight."

The blue and yellow dragons looked to each other.

"If Ignitus agrees, I suppose," Cyril grumbled. "Follow usâ€"but if you do not keep your pets in line I will personally make sure they do not see tomorrow's dawn."

40. TWO OF A KIND

"Little one...what is the meaning of this?" Shock was hidden deep within the recesses of Ignitus' voice as he studied my odd entourage. "This is certainly...unexpected."

"Indeed, as is the little one's tale and the feline's proposal," Cyril grumbled.

Staring at my paws, I related everything. Ignitus shook his head, but the ends of Terrador's mouth crept into the slightest of smiles after the short tale. "Unexpected, certainly, but not without benefits."

The green dragon turned to Thistle and dipped his head, meeting the ape's eyes same as he would for anyone. "I would like to speak with you if you are willing. While your kind once tainted act as brutes, tales of your prowess before Malefor do exist."

Thistle's eyes meant the dragon's, and I shivered. One look and it was plain to see that they were two of a kind. They both stood tall and proud, shoulders stiff against painful memories. Their eyes were both harsh and kind, battle and peace rolled into twin sets of orbs, one copper, the other green.

"I like that."

"I think our little Thorny's found a friend," I heard Kuro mutter to Hunter, and the proud cat couldn't hide a snort.

"I think he's found a twin of a different species if those looks are anything to go by. May your ancestors help the Dark Army, because I have a feeling their lives just got scarier."

Ignitus may have been the Guardians' commander, but Terrador was their gruff and preaching heart. A smile crept over the fire dragon's

face as he shook his head. "Terrador has always been the best at judging character. If he likes you, well, what can I say? It is a pleasure to encounter an ape whom I might understand."

Even Cyril could not seem to find reason to argue, though he made a point to look away disapprovingly as the stress drained from the room.

"So, Hunter, if I understand correctly?" Ignitus met the cat's eyes as he nodded. "You offered to track our lost champions, for lack of a better word?"

"Yes. I can see my friends are safe with you." Hidden meanings in those words sent a great chill up my spine. It sounded like a partial sentenceâ€" and likely the end of it involved nothing chivalrous. Or pleasant.

"If they are allies, we have no reason to attack," Ignitus said carefully. The fact that he made no promises or assumption was not lost to me.

"I don't know which of them is scarier," Kuro whispered in my ear, breath tickling my scales. He reminded me of dad...

"Hunter," I murmured back. "Ignitus is too saintlike to do anything that nasty."

"Here's a tip, little Myssy. Always, always, beware the loyal ones."

My mind wandered to Cynder, and I believed him.

*** . . . ***

"If you sho much ash twitch wrong, I'll haffily kill you both and claim shelf-defenshe."

Growling in her semi-stupor, Cynder latched hard onto my paw.
"No."

I sighed, tail stirring dust on the floor. "So you'll let him hurt you later instead? Cyn, he came close to killing you! You're the toughest, strongest person I know, yes, but you have limits just like everyone else!"

"Not...not if it'll hurt you." She couldn't lie to me. She would find a way to do it herself, I knew that.

"I'm sorry." I slipped my paw away from hers and saw the sanity drain from her gaze. It was sickening, seeing the best part of herâ€"her mindâ€"fade away like that. I was guiltier for that than anything else. If I had to sacrifice a bit of blood to help her get the answers she craved, so be it.

"Sho you vere keeping the drug tame," Travix muttered, forgetting for a moment to keep charades. His eyes showed a shadow of my distaste, and I had a sneaking feeling it had more to do with it happening to this dragoness than the method in general.

"It'sh a shick vay of doing things," he snapped at my raised eyebrow.

"Even I can shee that!"

"Afraid of morals, much?" Not to mention feelings...

"I vouldn't think now vould be an ideal time for mouthing off, myshelf," Travix growled, stepping forwards with a cat's dexterity.

"Sure you would," I grumbled, forcing my shivering paws to stay planted. "Or at least you'd do the exact same thing."

"I shuppose that nesshie's been a bad influenshe on you?" Travix grinned. "Good for her."

Shivers ran up my spine, and I could tell by the glare in his eyes he had every intention of drawing this out. I'd never seen a dragon more fitting of being called a predator. Not myself as the General, not Cynder at her most focused, not Terrador, not even when I was possessed by the Dark Master.

"Get it over with," I snapped stiffly, staring. He wasn't only being agonisingly slow to draw it out; he looked confused. As he shifted close enough, I saw something flash in his pale eyes, and not at meâ€"at Cynder.

I didn't like it.

41. BEHIND THE VEIL OF CHILDHOOD

To a hazed mind, the sounds next door meant little. The horrible part was that I knew something was terribly, terribly wrong. The last conversation circled through my mind as the world spiraled off-axis. Things that made sense seconds ago tore apart at the seams, and memories of moments before chased their tails around my frazzled mindâ€"they meant nothing to me.

The times the drug had affected me before, I had been unconscious.

Maybe the Scavengers were kinder than credited.

It should have worried me when the rustling stopped; when the door shut with a bang, and even Sparx sounded worried. I couldn't tell what he was saying, only that his voice was far too high and panicked.

Wasn't he going to take it away again? Get the damned buzzing out of my head... But he didn't. Beneath the venomous air's cocoon of confusion, I knew I should be afraid.

Time passed and little changed. Food was shoved into my cell, but I barely knew to eat it.

* * *

><p>Days and then a week passed in a monotony of worry. I grew increasingly grateful for Azuri and Bramble's company. They were a spark of life in our weary world. The female apeâ€"who was named something along the lines of Akyliaâ€"grew more lethargic with every

day, and I began to wonder just when the temple would gain a new member. Hunter had left long ago, and I worried for him, too.<p>

Kuro's band seemed content to rest at the temple for a while, and the more time I spent with the black dragon, the more the cool exterior melted away like frost in morning sunshine. I saw flickers of the prankster I remembered in his eyes.

He even helped me with my practice, grumbling something good-naturedly about not being able to stop me anyway. He'd told the guardians how it was a 'just in case' thing. "Wouldn't want her to be carried off again, and all that."

He certainly wasn't going to stop me. He approved. I saw the same pain in him as had pained me since that day when our village set off to war, only to fall to the General's cold fury before they had gotten past the closest mainland shores.

He taught me to fight for the lives swept away by cruelty, but to not let vengeance confuse necessary with petty deaths. An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.

I looked at my paws, clear as dawn in front of me. The blurring had receded, leaving the world an artist's masterpiece rather than a jumble of dull and sullen shades as it had been.

A crack of thunder shook the temple and I shivered. It sounded eerily like the cacophony that had shaken the temple during the last two raids. We were waiting warily for a third. Though their reputations were long shattered, the Dark Armies did not want our old generals to retake their places in the war again.

"Lovely weather we're having, huh?" Kuro sat next to me, covering me with his disproportionate shadow cast by the room's single torch.

I snorted, shaking my head. "Something like that. You don't change, do ya?"

He boxed my head lightly with a wingtip. "Kid, some things just don't change. It's one of the world's rules."

I snorted, batting the wing off my head. "Plenty changes."

He looked at me, shrude eyes narrowed. "I can see you're not doing too good, little girl. Are you actually gonna talk about it 'fore you give one of the old geezers a heart attack? Doesn't have to be me, but geez, kid, you need someone to talk to. You've practically been trailing steam all week. And I know you're only mad when you're upset."

I looked down at my paws, sighing. "I miss Cyn and Spyro. Even Sparx. I'm more in the dark now than I was when I was blind. She'd tell me it all, no matter how bad it bothered her. She was careful, but all of them besides you act like I'll shatter if they brush me wrong. I can be tough too. What do I need to do to show them all I'm not the little helpless hatchling they thought I was?"

I pushed my paws beneath me and began to pace, shivering with each bang of thunder.

"Even if I was, what would I get from staying like that? Look at me. Look at how many times I've nearly died. I'm not their kid; it's not their job to keep me safe. If I wanna be safe in this war, I gotta be tough or I'm not going to last. I have to be smart and understand what's happening to be safe. So if they want my safety, why not help me protect myself? You all have a hard enough time protecting yourselves."

"You know what, kiddo? You're right." My eyes widened as I turned to him.

"Really?"

"You don't sound too childish to me, kid. Last I saw you, you barely made sense talking about the flowers or the sky. You've changed, I don't know why. Maybe your head got a bit older than the rest of you when you were sleeping, or maybe there was something weird, nah, weird_{er} 'bout you from the start." He smirked, stubbornly dropping his wingtip right back over my head. "Still, I think it's hard for the old geezers to see that."

"Why?"

"'Cause they were supposed to protect a whole generation, Myst. And they failed. Spectacularly."

I glared at him for that, which he ignored, coming to a halt with his wingtip still draped over my head.

"Corrupt laws made them take all those eggs from families. My father kept in touch with Ignitus and the late shadow guardian. They thought it was wrong, but faced exile from an army that desperately needed them if they refused. For whatever reason, Ignitus and the other leaders refused to hide the eggs away."

"So it kinda is their fault?" I asked, eyes wide.

Kuro nodded grimly. "Your friends, Ignitus especially, must have taken the brunt of that pain. Two guardians died that day, and of course he would blame himself. He couldn't have kept Cynder safe when our world needed her so, but perhaps they all latched onto you as someone they could protect. Someone they wouldn't fail."

"So maybe they're trying to give me time to be a kid, like Cyn, Spyro, and the eggs never got?"

He nodded grimly, crimson eyes sullen. "A chance they don't understand you've already lost."

>At least not with all us boring old folk. Obviously you need a friend again. Hmmm. Wait."<p>

He straightened his lithe body and grinned. "Haven't flown in thunder in way too long, anyway. Tell the guardians I'm going recruiting!"

While I was opening my mouth to comment on the intelligence of flying in a thunderstorm, shadow gathered around his lanky limbs and he sank, almost comically, into the stone.

42. FATE'S ENTRAPMENT

Sleep was a distant affair, but in this state I could not differentiate it from reality. Even when I awoke on the great stone platform floating amidst ruins, I was still slurred and weak. Stubbornly, I did not even bother to struggle to my paws, head pounding and body exhausted.

"You've come far, young dragon."

"Leave me alone." I curled into myself miserably. At least I could talk straight, and the confusion was fading into a memory. I still could not grasp what had happened while I was out, but the time while my head had been mostly clear was terribly resolute. "I messed up everything."

"Young dragon, our path through life is not always the path we choose. Sometimes that path is chosen for us, and it is our destiny to follow it... Wherever it may lead."

"Sounds like a great excuse to blame anyone else for your flaws," I growled and shook my head before stepping dizzily onto the glowing green platform.

"Let's get this the hell over with."

Be steady, little one, and use the earth beneath you to feel your way..._

The stone beneath me was still and steady, but in my reverie it felt like it was simply brimming with light. I could feel the slightest twitch as a piece of rubble tumbled into space. I could feel nonexistent warm wind caress my wings as they stretched inadvertently to cradle it.

There's a balance to our world. The storm and the sea, the skies and the stars. Let that cycle flow like blood through your veins. Listen for the music of the wind howling in it's erratic nature. Listen to the ocean and her tantrums; the forest in her dreams.'

Rising up, power formed around me. Unlike the other elements, it didn't originate from me. It built from the swirling wind and the shivering earth. It came from the silent moon and the shimmering sun. It built into a green pulse around me and grew steadily in strength.

Breath with the earth, and unleash it. _

Shimmering green forms flitted like autumn leaves around the pillar of emerald light. A crackle from inside my belly reminded me of the mightiest earthquake as I snapped my wings open. Green light exploded into life around me as the platform beneath me shook with nature's fury.

Landing on my paws, I sighed tiredly when the Chronicler's voice resonated through the aether once again.

"The power of earth and nature is a mighty one."

"No shit. Really?"

"As the earth moves, so does everything in it. Be mindful as you wield it."

"Sure, whatever. Now teleport me wherever the hell you want me to go, because I am not moving." To prove my point, I collapsed on the glowing platform and closed my eyes, enjoying the clarity while it lasted.

"I want to know what is happening! I've done what you've asked of meâ€"unfortunatelyâ€"and followed this path of yours. All it's done is ladle even more shit into my life."

"Perhaps. But a time will come when you must follow your own path, and you are not yet ready. Open your eyes."

I growled as numbness swept my anger away, drowning me in a sea of blurring images.

A row of apes marched towards a tall peak that bled rivers of green, reaching up as though desperate to snatch at the twin moons. The uneven falls of their feet made an eerie sort of music as they drummed the damp ground. The grasping peak sent a shiver up my spine, like ice was crawling down it.

"Why... Why are they going towards that monstrosity?"

"It is their calling. Those tainted by Malefor's venom, and those with the blackest of hearts, cannot resist its temptation. It has become a beacon as the Night of Eternal Darkness approaches."

"Feel like clueing me in on that, already? I hear it again and again, yet nobody will give me a straight answer!"

"It is the night when the celestial moons come together in a great eclipse...and shroud our world in darkness. The Well of Souls rests at the pinnacle of this terrible shadow. It serves as a doorway through Convexity to countless other realms... Including that which serves as the Dark Master's prisonâ€"and even death itself. When the Night approaches, the spirits of the damned begin to struggle for freedom. He intends to harness their powers, along with others, to thrust himself, with them, from the prison beyond Convexity.

"Normally, the eclipse would allow the deceased to roam and take form in the hallways of the mountain...if only for a short while. The effect upon a living soul will be much greater... And soon that night will be upon us.

"If you wish to fight the dawning dark successfully...find me, in the Celestial Caves of the White Isle..."

* * *

><p>When my head was finally cleared of the intoxicating fog, it was far too late to change a thing. Though my body felt rested and strong, my mind focused immediately on the guilt of how utterly things had spiraled from my control. How easily my wishes were twisted into something that hurt one of my best friends to extent I

did not even know.<p>

I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry, Spyro. It wasn't your burden to accept... Please be okay. _Please._

And then my memories slowly began to resurface. I shivered at remembering two disappointed green eyes turning on me, like I'd failed that monster, not Spyro. Newly remembered, his words sliced through time like a guillotine.

_ "For shomeone who claims to cherish your friendsh, you don't undershtand them at all. The shtory of your power you vill not understand until you pull your head out of your own assh and think about vere your power might come from, like my power comesh from blood. It may be forshfully taken, but it shtill comesh from othersh. Who do you know with the power you vere forshed to accshept?"_

Even days later, I couldn't forget the blood that flowed in tiny rivers from his fanged mouth.

My mind was shaken from meandering down grim memories and into the present by the harsh clip of the pirate bird's unpleasant narration. "First of all, we regret to inform you that our original plan for this fight is no longer a possibility, as some poor fool released the promised Oroborus. I assure you that the culprit will be harshly reprimanded."

"Yeah, soon as we catch him, that blasted dragon is gonna _die!_ And we'll let you all be there to watch the gore flying! For a fee, of course!" the obnoxious one screeched, wings fluttering irritably.

"However," the other bird continued grimly, "we hope that our current plot will still do plenty to quench your thirst for brutality!"

"You better believe it will!" the other crowed happily.

"Be amazed you can even bear witness to this beast, for the Dark Army has been breeding it far from the eyes of _real _criminals!"

"Yeah! Those chumps ain't no use to anyone!" the other grumbled, doing the best impersonation of making fists possible with his flimsy wings. "They don't even try to work with the honest crime-lords! Like us! It's downright _rude!_"

Grumbling at how their voices affected my hangover, I shook my guilt away for the moment. Looking up at the stands, I growled and shouted, "When you're done discussing your failed relationship with anything halfway intimidating, can you please shut your twig of a beak?"

"As you wish, little whelping," the deep-voiced announcer rumbled.

The opposite door opened with a crash.

Fire billowed from the colossal doorway, accompanied by a rumbling snort that set the floor alight. Beedy eyes fixed on me, a great fiery head waving to and fro, adorned with two great, curling horns.

For a moment, all I could do was stare as a pawing cloven hoof left scorches on the hardwood floor.

My reverie was shattered as the beast lowered its head to charge.

* * *

><p>(BTW, this boss is a less than subtle reference to one of my favorite animated movies of all time. Kudos to anyone who recognizes him. I thought I'd follow up my reference of one of my favorite book series of all time (the three flaming cats) with a reference to one of the (In my opinion) best under-appreciated kid movies of all time. :D Oh, it was based on a book too.)<p>

43. GROWING UP FOR A MOMENT, ANYWAY

My head felt like it was floating on the wind, every twist and turn causing my consciousness to dip and sway in a way that made me sick. I knew the symptoms of anaemia, but it didn't make it any less unpleasant.

Every time I tried to comprehend the note the blood dragon had ill-temperedly left, my head felt like an agitated hornet hive. It was getting better by the day, but at an agonizingly slow pace. I was planning to read it in a moment, and memorise it, even if it blew my head to the moons.

They'd taken Cynder again, just as I was ready to try to wake her. Sparx had been forgotten, asleep, in her cell. He was currently buzzing around my head, rather displeased.

"Why didn't you wake me, you great purple idiot? For all we know, they put her with Bloody again!"

"I tried. You wouldn't budge. Why don't you just go? The arena's visible from outside and I've seen plenty of unsealed windows."

"Duh. Forcefield. Are you sure you're immune to the drug, Purpy?"

"Quite possibly not at the moment. A dragon's elemental powers are significantly strengthened and maintained by our blood. It's why blood dragons can get enough energy by drinking it alone, and why dragon's blood is preferred. While it isn't affecting me normally, it is effecting my powers and my headache. I couldn't clear someone else of the stuff if I wanted, hence why I waited to try and get her to the bars."

"Yeah... About what you did..." The gold dragonfly rubbed the back of his head, causing his antenna to bounce almost comically.

"...Thanks."

The sound of my jaw hitting the floor could have woken an army.

"..._What?"_

The dragonfly sighed, boxing me lightly on the nose. "Hey, quit it. You're not making this any easier. Cynder was in pretty bad shape. I don't know if she could have taken that... So thanks... And sorry,

you know, for being a jerk. Can we, like, forget this ever happened now?"

I blinked, tilting my head, thinking of my absent black friend. "Sparx! You do have a conscience. Who woulda thought it?"

A tinge of red covered the dragonfly's face as he turned to glare in a random direction. "Oh, shuddup..."

While my smile remained, the sarcasm trickled from my face. "No, Sparx. Listen. I'm impressed. You're starting to grow up, and I think Cynder will need you to be serious before this is all over. She really does need you, more than anyone."

"Thanks... I guess," the dragonfly muttered, studying his hands like they were the most fascinating thing in the world.

"And I hold no objection to forgetting this ever happened. I won't tell if you won't."

"Thanks, Violets." The gold insect grinned, leaning forward to playfully rub his balled fist against my forehead. " You're not so bad yourself."

* * *

><p>"Are you sure this is wise, Kuro?"</p>

I yawned, trying to shake sleep from my exhausted head. I'd barely slept since Kuro had departed in the thunderstorm, worried about him.

"It's fine, Marina. As I've told you twenty times, the Guardians are already accepting our group, apes and all. Plus, after what happened, they're hardly going to murder a child over her element. And for the love of the Ancestors, quit calling me that."

A deep chuckle resigned through the crisp post-storm air. "I don't think you're going to get her to stop that easily. And, 'Rin, I highly doubt that the Guardians are in a position to reject healers of our caliber, unique choices in adoption or no."

The shrill voice of a child cut in, and I could just barely hear the flapping of wings. "Lemmegolemmegolemmego! I want to look around!"

Eyes widening at the youngest dragon voice I had heard since I had awakened, I rushed to peek out of a shattered window. The young dragon I beheld was certainly the strangest I had ever encountered.

A tall water dragon held her by the scruff of the neck, which was unusual in and of itself. It would have broken the neck to hold most dragons like that, but clearly not this one. The deep grey dragoness' wings were flapping, causing her to swing comically to and fro in the slim water dragoness' hold. From her head perked two of the largest ears I had ever encountered, bouncing with each swing.

"Lemmedownlemmedownlemmedooooowwwnnn!"

"Hush, little one," the female muttered through the dragonskin bunched in her jaw. "Not until we're sure of our reception."

The little dragon shut her mouth so hard her teeth clicked audibly together, and for the first time I noticed her canines hung slightly lower, needle-thin, from her top jaw.

Dashing to the door, I peeked my head out. "Kuro?"

"Hey." The black dragon grinned. "Told ya I'd bring new recruits!"

* * *

><p>"What, no sarcastic comment?" I asked as I dove through the great fiery bull's legs, skidding to a stop and turning around when the beast's shadow had passed.<p>

"...Sparx?" While I frantically whipped my head to and fro, one great horn clipped my side and sent me tumbling into the moat at the arena's edge. Glaring at my newest bloody gash, I snarled. "Oh, you are going to regret that."

A shadow formed in the water beneath me, and with a feral grin I dived into it. Racing along the water and wood within it, I exploded into the air before the creature.

Focusing my guilt, fear and rage into a burning mass, I narrowed my eyes.

_ "Bring it." _

44. NEVER MET A FRIEND LIKE ME

"_Oooh_ who's _that_?" The hyper, eared dragon peered down, tail wagging like an enthusiastic puppy. "Hi!"

Shifting my weight between my forepaws, I looked up at the strange dragon. She looked to be about ten or eleven. "Uh, hi? I'm Myst."

The small dragoness grinned toothily. "I'm Viriti! I haven't met another kid in so long! It's great to meet you!"

"Thanks," I said with as much conviction as I could, even though that toothy smile sent a strange chill up my spine. "You too. All of you."

"You are very well-mannered for someone so young," the large male thunder dragon rumbled approvingly. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Tanarus; this is my mate Marina and our daughter Viriti."

"I'm Myst," I squeaked again, feeling totally inadequate. Electricity dragon indeed. His voice resonated with thunder, even in its crisp politeness. The second thought that entered my head when I met this towering dragon was 'politician.'

Honestly, the first frantic thought was something along the lines of '_pleasedon'teatme!_'

Heh, if that's my instinct, I can't wait for Sparx meet him...

The yellow dragon towered at least four feet over Terrador's impressive stature, with long horns that only made him look all the more powerful. They, along with his diamond tailblade, seemed to spark every so often, as if he had far too much electricity in him to keep under complete control.

"Daddy, you're scaring her," the fanged dragon whined. She looked at me and grinned. "He does that to most people! You get used to it!"

I did my best not to stare, but avoiding her gaze seemed to tip her off just as easily. She raised a paw to rub the back of her head, between her ears and large set of ram's horns, leaving the thick fur at the base of her ears ruffled. "Er, yeah... I'd like to think people get used to that, too."

I bet that's tough to live with, whatever caused it. I knew my eyes had softened. "No, it's alright. I just..."

Just what exactly?

I still felt totally inadequate.

"Don't worry about it, you're better than a lot'a people, especially dragons. I'm used to it." Her tail wasn't twitching anymore, and her ears had drooped against her head. "Can you please let me down, Mom?"

"Can you hold still until Kuro talks to his friend?" the finned dragon murmured through her daughter's scruff, attempting to smile around it.

"If I have to."

"Can you be calm, and not scare any of our new friends? Silly though it may be, it's in many species' instincts to be afraid of you."

"Yes."

Instincts... That did make sense. Her ears, while they seemed totally out of place on a dragon, were commonplace on many mammalian species I'd met. Her teeth were actually smaller than mine in all likelihood, lacking mass in exchange for thinness and length. The red eyes were disconcerting, but nothing another dragon couldn't easily sport. They were only a few shades brighter and a little more luminescent than Ignitus'.

Logically, she wasn't that scary or even that unusual. Yet still, even looking up at her made my wings itch to fly away as quickly as I could. It wasn't like her proud father, who could make anyone nervous with his stature alone. It felt engraved, and my eyes widened when I thought of the only legend that could make even a dragon cower like prey.

I sat quickly, pulling my wings to my side as I ran over the scant facts I knew of them. Drawing a deep breath, I raised my head to look at the no-longer squirming dragoness with wide eyes.

"You're a blood elemental, aren't you?"

I could see the twinge of a broken heart clear on her face as she wrapped her wings around her like a cape and looked down.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am."

* * *

><p>"Sparx... Does Cynder know you can read this fluently?" I asked in disbelief.<p>

"She's blind like that. I was in her lessons with Ol' Smokey, after all, and she was always busy with you and Myst. She refused to read up on any of the lovely med stuff that could save her life if none of your sparkly glowstones were around. So...maybe I did just a little reading."

I stared. "Glowstick, that was intelligent. By the Ancestors, miracles never cease."

"I'm not sure whether that was insult or praise, so I won't torch your butt too bad, Amethyst."

I grinned, lifting one paw from my eyes for an instant, despite the buzz of my headache from the light. With a smirk, I snorted a film of smoke from my nostrils. "Who would be scorching whose butt again, candlestick?"

He batted the smoke from his face, his attempts not to laugh quite evident. "Do ya wanna hear your nice bedtime story or not, little baby violets?"

Shockingly, my silence was all the encouragement he needed to start reading aloud.

"'Dear friends...' Hey, sounds like someone ain't good with names. 'There are whispers going about the ship. Word of your captivity has travelled quickly...' Who woulda guessed, what with us being, you know, publicised gladiators and all that. 'Many of the prisoners are uneasy.' 'Cause don't we know how happy prisoners are most of the time. 'They say the ape king himself has placed a bounty on you, alive, and on the death of any other dragons. '"

"That isn't good." I shivered, drawing my wings against my flanks. "I can only think of one reason they'd want me alive..."

"Yeah, no kidding." Sparx looked at me, and I could see pity flash in his eyes. "But, come on. You might not be able to take care of everything yourself, but you have Cyn and me now! We can be pretty damn badass when we want to be." He glared at my raised eyeridge. "Fine, she can be pretty badass when she wants to be. But still. If you ask me, they won't be taking you nowhere in a hurry. Don't worry about it."

Turning back to the scroll, he continued reading. "'These are dark times.' Really? Who would'a thunk? 'But know this, you have allies.' And I thought Old Smokey and friends were acquaintances! Gee, this guy's intelligent. 'I look forward to the day when we can

meet, and hope it will come to pass soon. The Guardians are worried. Hunter of Avalar.'_"

"Well wasn't that thoughtful," Sparx griped. "I particularly like the part about the dark times and the danger."

I snorted. "Could've done without the narration, Twinkles, but oh well."

"Aww but, Purply, you know you'll learn to love me. I am irresistible, after all!"

45. GLADIATOR

The burning beast tossed its horned head, snorting. From its nostrils embers and smoke trailed up to be caught and held by the barrier. Its pawing hoof left sparks jumping from the scorched wood before it lowered its head and charged.

With a hiss, I drew myself onto my back legs for an instant. Blue power swarmed around my forepaws as they came crashing down, and with them came the moat water, rising into walls that splashed the barrier before crashing down in a thunderous torrent.

I snapped my wings open and down, launching into the air as the water splashed down upon the flaming beast before trailing back into the moat and leaving the wood shining where it had been.

Amidst a fog of steam stood the red bull. If a huge fiery beast could look bored, he managed it. Quite easily.

"And a novice mistake from the dragon," the bird grumbled, voice deep. "The red bull has more power than that. Tales tell that even the waves of the ocean cannot extinguish its flames. Our moat certainly won't have much of an effect."

Well, that rules out water.

Green light exploded from my jaw with a rumble, sending the beast careening back five or six feet before its cloven hooves dug into the damp wood with a hiss of steam. As it ducked its snorting head to charge, I sent a blast of shadow at it. Exploding around the beast, black and red tendrils fought for dominance, but in the end my shadow was scorched from the thing's form.

It didn't even stop running.

Hissing in pain from stretching my new scrape, I lurched to the side. Though I missed becoming a lovely black shishkabobâ€"barelyâ€"the bull's horn caught and tore the edge of my left wing membrane.

With an impressive pinpoint turn, it barreled towards me again. Ten feet, eight, six...

The tendons in my hind legs snapped taut as I burst up to skid onto the beast's neck. Covering myself in my own haze of flame, I rolled across its flaming back and fell to the still water-slick floor behind it. I skidded to a halt and whipped around.

The red beast wasn't quite as deft with its movements. With a great snarl of rage, it careened forward until its forehooves skidded off the wood and into the moat. Its head followed with a great thud as it met the wooden edge.

Great flaming hind legs tried desperately to pull the bull from the moat. It did little good, pulling back only slightly before its front met the steaming water again and its head struck the wall once more. Each attempt was followed by the crash of keratin against wood.

Even with my exasperation at this whole pile of crap we'd been forced to wade into, I was amused.

"And everyone says that I can be bullheaded," I growled with a slight grin. I was answered with a throaty snarl, the skid of hooves and the following crash.

I approached cautiously, eyeing the deepening scratches caused by the bull's horns as they continuously met the moat's wooden wall. Wait... If they kept the jails within the ship constantly flooded with the drug...and if he broke through... With the place surrounded by a barrier fit to hold in fire, water and steam...

A leak did not sound pleasant.

Not again. And certainly not by my own mistakes. How to change it before anything happened... Come on, use your head.

Dashing to the red monster's side, I lowered my head and charged. I leapt just before I struck, and my forehead connected with the beast's flank with a slap. It's strangely thin legs scrambled desperately on the water-slick wood as its hindquarters were forced too into the moat. Jarred to the side, his remaining limbs collapsed into the water with a splash and the hiss of steam.

Nobody said I couldn't literally use my head.

Ancestors, I'm rhyming now. When I find the miserable butthole who discovered Angel's Folly, I am so ripping him into little bloody splinters.

Lost in thought, I barely dodged the blaze of flame originating from the red bull's mouth as it turned its head to glare. It could only fit sideways in the moat, and even still its large haunches were pressed in by the small rim.

I stared at the creature, unsure. It was helpless now, so honestly I didn't feel particularly inclined to kill it. Besides that, I didn't exactly feel like getting close enough to try with melee, and my elemental powers had proved rather useless.

Deciding took too long. The great bull lurched onto its hind legs and dragged itself back into the arena, nose, ears and eyes trailing smoke. It only stood panting for a moment before it lurched forward once again, forcing me to leap into the air despite my torn wing.

It didn't hurt anymore than moving it would have.

Confused, I turned my head to find a thin layer of wind and steam coating my wings, guarding them from the full force of the harsh air.

I'd nearly forgotten wind, or rather 'air' according to the books in the library. After all, wind wasn't a substance in and of itself, only the movement of one.

Doesn't fire _need _air? I remembered one of Ignitus' lectures, and looked down at the creature with a growl.

I hope this works.

I slapped my forepaws together before tugging them fiercely apart as daggers of wind formed around them. The heat-shimmering area around the red bull seemed to form into white mist that condensed into a bubble around him, robbing from the space within it both his fireâ€"and his breath.

Breath he didn't even know to save. He let out a rumbling feral scream as his fire sizzled before flickering out.

I turned my head up to the howling crowd, glaring at the captain with smoldering eyes. I couldn't help flinching when I heard the crash of the creature's collapse, and its last spluttering breath.

"Is this_ really_ what you enjoy?"

46. DEATH BRAWL- OKAY, NOT REALLY

"I don't like this." Sparx sat on my back, crouching low so he was all but invisible between my folded wings. I was unceremoniously yanked towards the arena via collar and chain. "Why didn't they bring Cyn back?"

"Well, that was what these brutes consider an infirmary, so hopefully it means she isn't badly hurt."

His hands were quivering on my back, so I looked back at him with my best attempt at a comforting smile.

The filed teeth didn't exactly help.

"You don't give her enough credit, Sparx. Like you said, she's tough. She can look after herself."

"Sure, maybe. But who's gonna look after_ me?_"

I sighed dramatically as the gate cracked open before us. "I guess that would be me. Awful chore to get stuck with, I know, but someone's gotta do it."

"Are you implying that I'm unable to look after myselfâ€"Cyn?"

I followed his gaze to see Cynder stumbling from the other door, the drunkenness slowly fading from her steps.

"They can't be serious."

"Scallywags and assassins, carnivores and schemersâ€"as an apology for the lack of our Oroborus, we are proud to present you with a special bonus match! None other than the crowned Prince of Terror himselfâ€"the Dark Army's own General!"

"Bring on the pain!" the obnoxious one seconded loudly.

"And facing off against him, another fearsome dragon! Word has steadily spread of her importance, and it is our pride to present Cynder the dragon!"

"Somehow, I get the sense they're quite serious," Cynder replied in a whisper as she approached. "However, such arguments can't be made for their intelligence."

"No kidding." Sparx fluttered to her, hugging her nose. "Don't you ever, ever leave me like that again!"

Her eyes softened. "I'll try."

"Hmph." He flicked her nose. "Well, I dunno about you, but I'm going to go hover over there until you two settle whatever issue the slobbery mangy drool-mutts think you have. Have fun!"

We'd kept our conversation quiet, so the rambunctious crowd remained unaware of it. However, they were far less helpfully oblivious to the fact that we were supposed to be fighting to the death.

"Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Cynder snorted irritably. "Don't they just have the most wonderful vocabulary?" Then her eyes widened as the rest of the drug likely left her system. "Spyro, I'm so, soâ€"

I raised an eye ridge. "Don't I know it. I'll bet people like this give Volteer nightmares."

"Not your place toâ€"umâ€|" Cynder was forced to stop and snort. Rant successfully stifled. Shocking, I know.

"We don't have much time, feel free to lecture me later. What do we do?"

"Stop chatting and bring on the pain!" The high-pitched bird hollered.

Her emerald eyes darted around the arena, taking in the progressively less impressed mutts. "I think we've gotta put on a show if we want any time to think. Are you up to it?"

"Yes," I said optimistically, even with my dizzy head and aching neck. She didn't need to worry about me more than she already did. She looked less than impressed by the lie, one eye ridge raised.

"We don't have time," I muttered, glancing at the riled crowd before pacing to the side.

Cynder caught on quickly and grinned maniacally. She was always quite an actorâ€| Unlike me. I blinked and tried to make my lips writhe. They twitched. Subtly. Great.

Something brushed my arm, and I glanced down to see Sparx.

"Dude, crouch down more and wave your tail."

I eyed him incredulously and whispered back, "_You're_ trying to teach me how to be scary?"

He jabbed his thumb in Cynder's direction. "Have you lived with her all your life?"

"...Point taken."

"Now growl. Loud, Purply. You know that green glowing gunk you use? Put some on your claws."

"Gunk?" I huffed, forcing a growl to vibrate in my throat. I never tried to act like thisâ€¦ It was disconcerting. I'd never tried to think about how a growl deepened my voice and reminded me of being a monster.

"Better. Now get your paws glowing."

Underneath me, green flickered, casting ghostly shadows. Cynder approached. "You don't need to do this, Spyro. I don't want to hurt you." Fake steel shone in her eyes. "But I will if I must."

"Uhâ€¦"

I heard the slap of Sparx's palm meeting his face from his hiding place under my wing. "Mushroom juice, you're useless. Just say exactly what I say, starting now. Kapeesh?"

I nodded slightly, the crowd quickly returning to complaints after a brief session of cheering.

"Just like old times, Cynder." I followed suit, continuing to pace around her, the growling still mauling my voice.

"Spyro, stop. We need you!"

"What did you expect?" I echoed Sparx's words, trying to distance myself from the situation and what I had to say. "You poor fool. Do you think this darkness is washed away so easily? Did you expect to change me?"

I glanced at the glow from beneath my wing and back at her. Her underlying calmness proved I was the only one the least bit bothered over this. Still, I did my best to let the words pass through me without touching me. "Did you think you could change me when you can't even get out of here? And the pink isn't even remotely intimidating."

I shook my wing but he continued; I couldn't do better, so I followed along. It had to be better than whatever I could come up with.

"Your breath is bad and you snoâ€"what?" I turned to glare at the glow that was Sparx, but the birds interrupted me.

"Ah, so the King of Terror and our realm's 'hero' sleep together, do they? How very interesting. Perhaps this shall be even more interesting, this lover's spat."

What a ridiculous way to try and distract the crowd. Why would she ever have any interest in me, a scarred leftover of the Dark Armies, and an ambiguous traitor to my own species? After allâ€"why was the crowd reacting like that?

...They believed him. The crowd was rocking back and forth in howling fits of laughter and cheers. So was Sparx, or so I gathered from the thumping into my wing membrane. Cynder had forgotten everything and fallen to her rump, her blush so evident that her black scales were tinged pink. What was her issue? She didn't react like this; she snapped the neck of whatever had offended her. Violently.

But apparently not this time. I didn't have time to ask, though, because something hit the barrier with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, and I looked up to see it cracking. A roiling mass of fear was seeping into the cracks, and above it circled shadows I knew all too well.

Dreadwings.

And there swooped down the most gruesome of them all. Tattered wings folded to its side as another ruby shot of fear shattered the barrier into jagged fragments that dissolved as they crashed to the deck. The force of the blast forced me to the ground and, seconds later, hard talons crushed my wings against my body and caused pain to lance through me as they tore into the scales just above my stomach. The blood loss wasn't that bad, but after what had happened earlier, I became dizzy in seconds. The world faded as I felt a great lurch into the sky and the struggling of a small form desperately trying to escape from under one of my pinned wings.

47. IN A LAND OF GIANTS

Blood dragons. I had never been sure if they were real or not. The legends were common, but everybody thought something different. Theories wandered from 'extinct subspecies' to 'damned by the ancestors as eggs.' But that made no sense alongside every other story I'd ever heard about the ancestors.

Still, absurdity didn't change the fact that this dragon sent a shock of fear up my spine for no real reason. Silence hung like thick syrup in the air, and it took more courage than it should have to break it.

"Soâ€| You wanna talk to the Guardians. I'll go get them. That okay?" I looked to the water dragoness, glad that at least one of the party wasn't intimidating.

"We would like that, thank you," she answered, violet eyes soft. I didn't doubt that she was just as nervous I was.

I turned and did my best not to break into a run on my way back into the temple. I stopped by the scrying pool for a moment, laying my head on the cool rim and trying to calm my jumping nerves.

"Calm down," I muttered to no one, drawing in a long breath. "If you can deal with apes, you can deal with dragons. Right? Right."

I padded to a room where Terrador, Bramble and several others were

working to clear rubble. They needed the space. If anyone else showed up, there would be a distinct lack of places to put them.

"Kuro's back from 'recruiting.' "

"Oh?" Akylia turned from where she sat on rubble piled against the wall, one hand on her stomach. "Is anyone with him?"

"Er, yes. Parents and a kid a little older than me. They're dragons. Do you know them? Their names are Tanarus, Marina and Viriti?"

"Their names are quite an interesting coincidence." Terrador turned to me. "Taranus and Marina were healers that were ambushed shortly before the General appeared. What are the parent's elements? Water and Electricity?"

I nodded, a little numb. "Is Tanarus really, really big with lightning-shaped horns and a crest that goes down to his chin? And Marina's light blue with?"

"Yes, it sounds like them. Will you go and tell our guests I will be out shortly? I need to fetch Cyril!"

I blinked as he paced from the room. Why Cyril? Ignitus was usually the one people went to!

"Shade has taken a risk bringing Viriti here. I pray your guardians are lenient. He trusts easily. Perhaps too much so." Akylia shook her head. "Then again, it was his faith that led us this far. Marina actually said once that he may be a fool, but this world could use more fools like him."

"I can get what she meant, I guess. I better let them know Cyril and Terrador are coming. But, er, about Viriti? Is she?" My paws had become much more interesting than they usually were, that was for sure.

The ape's eyes softened, and she carefully got down from where she was sitting to place a hand on my muzzle. "That little dragon wouldn't hurt a fly if she was starving, Sweet. She's a big reason my mate started trusting dragons in the first place, maybe more than Kuro."

"Okay! Thank you. I know it's not fair, but my instincts really don't care, and everything I've heard about blood dragons has always been awful."

Her eyes laughed before she shook her head. "Little one, who are you talking to? Or what, really?"

She gave me the tiniest of shoves. "Now get going, Marina needs to know Cyril's coming. From what I know of your Gaurdian, this is not going to end well. Maybe you can calm them down again if need be. They are teachers, after all, and you helped with us. It's only natural that their stupidity being pointed out by a hatchling would serve as just the slap they need. A teacher's biggest job is to learn."

She struggled back up to her perch, and I helped push her up with my

forehead, careful not to slice her foot. She shook her head when she reached her perch, and wrapped her arms around her stomach like she was hugging it to her. She grinned beneath sparkling eyes. "I am sure this one will teach me plenty."

I turned my head as I paced away. "Will he or she be here soon?"

The ape nodded. "Yes."

* * *

><p>"Come on, you big purple lump, you have to wake up!" I batted my hand against purple scales, not happy that they were still. Was he breathing? Was he alive? Cynder would be miserable if anything happened to the lunk.<p>

It was a good thing I glow, though. At least I could see. Not that there was much to see at all. I was stuck tight under purple-boy's wing, barely with enough space even to flutter.

I thwacked him again for good measure. "C'mon, I gotta get back to Cynder. You do too, so wake the hell up!"

My fists were hurting; my skin was no match for dragonscale. My knuckles were red and raw, but who cares. It was nothing I wasn't used to. I wasn't about to avoid sis, even if she was so much bigger! Of course she hurt me by accident sometimes; she's freaking twenty times my size. Better she didn't know when it happened. I could deal. A scrape here and there was well worth being close to her, 'cause if she knew she'd try and stay away or treat me like I was delicate. That's no way to be with family.

I settled against Spyro's red membrane. My stomach did not like the jagged rise and fall of whatever was carrying us, but bashing my head or tail whenever it went up or down was worse.

"I want off this ride," I muttered. Pretty pathetic. I couldn't even cheer Cynder up, and that was about all I'd been good for. She needed me! And I'd made her promise not to leave and then I was the one leaving. Great.

I sure as hell hadn't tried hard to stay, either, at least not in any way that made any difference.

Time stretched on and the jerking continued. I sat sadly. There wasn't anyone there to talk to, and nowhere to move. I was sure a few hours had already passedâ€"hours away from Cyn. Maybe she was following; maybe she'd save me like always and everything would be okay. I brought one finger up to massage between my eyes, grimacing as I tried to rub the worry away.

At least no one was there to see me like that, even more pathetic than usual. Even if being alone was the thing I hated most. The light through Spyro's wings was getting darker, bathing me in a faint blood-red shine and turning my shimmer to a sad orange. My stomach flipped with another flap of the whatever's wings, and then the dive began and I thwacked against a wingbone. I rubbed my now bruised head.

My thoughts flashed back to the swamp, to home. To mom and dad. You

know, I'd always figured we wouldn't be away for that long. That Cynder would think better of it and go home when she realised it was the best place to be. But apparently that was me, not her. Her home was very different now.

She was the only home I had now, and I promised I'd never leave her.

As the dive shoved me against the other end of my little pocket, I shut my eyes tight and tried to pretend she was there. It didn't help the pain in my wings as they were pulled the wrong way and bent all wrong.

"I want to go home," I muttered to nobody.

48. MAN OVERBOARD

Shit.

At least the pirate mutts were pretty pathetic when I wasn't drugged, but we were in no condition to go against the Dark Army.

Batlike shadows swarmed over the deck as the bigger monsters slammed into the boat, throwing up dust as I dug my claws in as the whole thing shook. One huge dreadwing plummeted, flaring its wings close to the deck and clearing the dust as the wind from its downstroke beat my scales.

Moments later, I realized where the thing was aimed, just as the cracked floor started leaking crimson smog. I was lucky enough to get a noseful of it, and my world spun. Of course they'd keep the drugs under the arena! How could that possibly go wrong?

Dazed by the wringing pressure in my head, I jerked away from the stream of venom and darted forward. Too late. I blinked as I looked up at the departing shadow, not even remembering to cringe when crimson peppered my face.

Spyro's blood! I spread shaky wings and pummeled the air as I tried to rise, only for something to block the beast from view, obliterating the harsh light from my vision.

My dazed head was two seconds too late in realizing a great wooden beam was tumbling towards me.

My wings were three seconds too slow in spreading.

I don't know how I got out of the way. It felt like something pulled me deep in my chest and sent me tumbling to the side, only halting when I slipped into the moat.

The chill did something to clear my head, but not enough to stop its spinning. I stumbled from the moat, shaking and trying to bring my fire forth to warm me, only to remember that the damned drug permeating the air, even if faintly, effectively blocked my powers. And the damned headache didn't help a thing, either. The world blurred around me, swaying for a few minutes before I heard an irritable growl.

"Oh for the love ofâ€| Thish vay, there'sh an opening."

Too dazed to think of the only dragon in the world who could have spoken with such a lisp, I followed the voice, blinded by dust as I wobbled through a hole torn in the arena wall. Blearily, I looked from side to side, only to wince at the jarring motion. Inwardly, I swore to any ancestor I trusted (A.K.A Kaboa) that I would never touch any form of drink. Ever.

The thought was swept away when my vision cleared to reveal a certain striped dragon lazily perched upon the carcass of a Scavenger as though it was a perfectly normal endeavor. He was washing one paw of blood as a cat would.

"Come on, Princessh, shomehow I doubt you would like shtaying when that gas getsh in here, vitch I'm sure it vill."

He tossed a blade of blood at me, and I ducked seconds before it speared an inch from my shoulder, feeling the wind as it passed. I darted a glance back to see it meet one of the mutt's throats with a gush of red.

"The hell are you here?" I muttered, turning back to glare.

"Vhy can't I jusht vish to help you? Is shuch an option really sho abshurd?"

"Uhâ€|. Yes. Now, Bloody, either get the hell outta my way or prepare to fight, I've got things to do." I stalked past him, gathering a fire blast to burst through a wall. He poked my shoulder, so I turned to stare venom.

"You might not want to do that. That gas ish flammable and right behind that wall. It'sh a cell that leadsh right to the arena."

"And I should trust your word why?"

He stared at one clawed paw, as if studying how the light fell upon it. "Vhat choishe do you have? By the shound of it, you've no time to lose."

I hated this guy for being right. "And I suppose you'd know where we are? I need to get somewhere, and I'd rather not go go searching for a map in this mess."

"Not a clue. The only reashon I'm back here ish because the only nearby land I could find was enchanted againsht blood dragon entrance. Shoon ash I got close, it was like I couldn't mushter any shtrength. Damn your anshestors' excushe for a transhlater."

"What? You're not talking about the Chroniclerâ€|"

"Of courshe I am. He'sh hardly a rare subject among ush users of '_dark'_ magic. I'm looking for him to get a queshtion answered."

"And you know where he is?" I cast him a disbelieving glance. "Then why were you laying around this dump playing devil's gladiator?"

"Not jusht for free food, actually. Free ride. I knew they'd come the right vay eventually. Flying vay out here vould not be fun."

I narrowed my eyes. "Would I be able to get in? I have a bone to pick with him myself."

"Courshe you could." His eyes narrowed. "Vhat vould you shay to a little truceâ€? It shounds like we haveâ€ mutual intereshts."

"And once again, this begs the question of why the hell I should just take your word for anything."

"I know vhere you're going. There isn't a shrap of land in any other direction. Alsho, I know vhere that shmoke will fill first, and if I wanted to save you for a shnack, I'd have every reason to have jumped you moments ago when you vere as drunk and ushless as a wooden leg in a volcano."

I blinked. "...What?"

"Exactly. Now, can ve move before I'm forced to drag your drugged assh outta here? Ve can argue my motives after ve're out of muttbog."

"Fine," I growled. "But if you try anything, I will rip your wings out and leave you for the sharks."

I hated this guy. I really, truly hated this guy and his damned sense-making. What had happened to me? I used to be so nice and uncaring about whether something made sense or notâ€!

Then again, in those good old days, Spyro and my brother hadn't been at stake.

"Lead the way, bloodboy."

"Follow my lead, Princessh." He smirked, rapping my nose with the tip of his bladeless tail as he stalked forward. "If ve're careful, ve should be able to avoid the drugged shections eashy enough."

I stalked after him, grumbling as a pack of mutts raced forward, yipping about escaping prisoners. These guys just didn't know when to give up. The blood dragon and I glanced at each other before simultaneously flashing forward with twin snarls. At least his teeth didn't spoil this sound, unlike his speech. Adrenalin that had been building up roared through me as my fire danced across my scales.

We dove into battle, the world blurring as my head settled into something familiar. I barely noticed the flare of pain brought on by a scrape of a sword. I barely noticed how the blood caked and hardened to a scab in a process that should have taken hours.

I glanced at the blood dragon, sending an icicle that grazed his leg and fractured the arm of a small Scavenger. Grazing him was almost unintentional.

I don't need your help!

He took the shallow wound in stride, blood flowing to coat the leg in question with gauntlet-like bladed armor and sharpened spikes for

claws. He slammed his paw through the air, each blood 'claw' shooting forth to impale a separate Scavenger somewhere vital. I ripped another's hand from a suddenly bloody arm.

We left the tatters of the group, and ran in silence. Damn, he was good, I'd give him that. Better than Spyro; likely better than me. The only dragon I'd peg as definitely being able to take him on was Ignitus. Reassuring, right?

If he wasn't serious in this treaty, I was completely screwedâ€|

We tore through dog after dog, and I shivered when I realized how much blood had accumulated on my companion's form. Sick browning red plate-armor coated his form, half-foot spikes running down his spine. A barbed tail blade formed on his bald tailtip, his furred ears growing stiff and spiky. His eyes were glowing now, the ghostly green a stark contrast to the blood armor.

It was quite possibly the most terrifying thing I had ever seen.

He just had to barrel through them now. Spiked as he was, the mutts were bound to hit something deadly. I'd fallen behind, weeks of being in battle or drugged taking their toll, flinching when I was peppered red in his wake. Resorting to creating a whirlwind at my heels, I raced to keep up.

"Blast there." He nodded with his muzzle, and I barely had time to take in that the wall was round before my fireblast slammed forth. Wind and fire beat us as we dove forward, and I had to shut both eyes against the maelstrom of ash and dust that pummeled into me. Sore wings snapped open to catch me.

We were out. No matter what went wrong, at least we were outâ€|

"C'mon, Sparx," I muttered tiredly, looking about for my faithful companion. "Let's get the hell outta hereâ€|"

Nobody answered. I turned frantically, eyes widening as I gazed at the flaming, steaming, smoking excuse for a ship. It only took moments more for it to shatter into pieces, an explosion that sent Travix and I reeling. The pain didn't matter. My freezing, suddenly drenched paws didn't matter, nor my aching head.

The ship lay in ruins, a purple haze of concentrated drug flaming atop the water, torched oil creating a nauseating shimmer on the waves.

Sparxâ€|

"**_SPARX!_**" The scream rumbled my throat as something in my chest broke free to wither and die alone.

No no noâ€|

I was supposed to look after him, but a few distractions was all it took to forget! Why wasn't he following? He always followedâ€|.

Always.

My throat was hoarse from desperate calling. Chill wind and spray drenched my scales as I prepared to launch towards the mass of bodies, wood, oil and gas. Atop the water was a living hell, but I would dive in and I would find my brother if I had to snatch him from Death's jaws myself.

With a scream that suddenly flashed red, I sped through the air as fear for him peppered my veins and tainted shadow swirled in my wake. No. No. No.

I turned with glowing eyes and a snarl when something latched onto my tail, finding the panting blood dragon grasping it in his forepaws.

"Don't be shtupid. You'll jusht get drugged, torched, and drown. The drug vill make it sho you can't control your resishtance to fire. The fire will burn your membranes sho you can't fly, and then you'll get a nice oil bath before drowning, and then neither of ush will get a thing ve vant, now vill ve?"

"I don't care." I could see white light shining off his scales, but didn't care if that meant my darkness was rearing its ugly head again.

My tail was yanked back as my wings screamed from the force of being pulled, and a paw collided against my cheek with an audible slap, leaving behind three stinging gashes.

"Vell, for some reason, I sheem to care, so letsh get the hell away from here. Anyone who was in there ish dead now, sho besht you focush on thoshe that aren't."

I swear those words killed me better than any foe I'd faced. Goddamn him to hell; I hated the fact that this monster was right.

49. I SEE FIRE

Myst

Well, this was awkward. I just wished I knew why.

Cyril stood and stared as the water dragoness shifted uncertainly from forepaw to forepaw. His gaze continued to leap from Viriti, now perched on Marina's head and cowering between her intricately curled horns, to her face, which looked nervous but void of guilt.

Seeing the little dragon crouched behind her mother's frilly blades upon her forehead washed the fear from my system. Her eyes were wide and her ears were plastered against her ram-like horns, her twitching tail scrunches to the back of her hind legs.

Kuro looked just as confused as me, but Tanarus merely stepped to his mate and placed a gigantic wing over her back.

"You were dead. Or so everyone thoughtâ€|" Cyril murmured, the side of his lip twitching in the ghost of a snarl. "I mourned for you, Marina. Mourned and mourned. You tore our family apart when you left with him; left me with the shadow of a mother and a jealous wreck of

a father to contend with. And now you have the gall to show up here and soil your pride as one of the last water dragons by adorning yourself with a common electric clown and a little mongrel void of even the ancestor's blessings."

The blue dragoness's features changed in a flash as her eyes hardened from gentle violet pools to shards of icy amethyst. She curled her tailtip around Viriti before laying the child gently between her mate's shoulders. Striding up to the imposing guardian without pause, she stretched her nimble neck to be level with him. "You will not speak of our parents when you were not there to see Alphindale burn with them in it. You squandered our privilege of knowing family to become a guardian, and it was left to me to remember that honor is no treasure worthy of losing family."

Though she lacked his high-society drawl, she had the same long-winded speech. The mirage of a purely gentle dragoness melted in mere moments. I couldn't help but remember a pair of siblings I'd met long ago, not even dragons, and in that instance it clicked. This was no petty brawl as it had been, but it held the same rhythm. I guess siblings sometimes never really grow out of it.

"Unlike your little healing occupation, I had battles to wage and troops to lead. While you were wasting the last of a dying art healing papercuts, I was saving legions and ensuring Warfang and Draedalus did not fall. Do you have any clue what good you could have done, robbing our enemy of their water sources?"

"And you would have lost a good quarter of your army were it not for us healers fixing up those 'little papercuts.'"

"When the General burned Alphindale to the ground, did that do any good? There was no resistance!"

Her eyes flashed. "It was not the General. Or the Dark Army. But how would you know that? You were off playing 'posh' idiotâ€| But you couldn't know thatâ€|"

"Yes, Rini." The bitter petname flew like a slap. "I arrived just in time to see the great flames burning out. I came as soon as I could find a suitable replacement. I may not have seen our parents burn, but I smelt the char of bodies and I saw fire on that mountain as Alphindale burnt. If it was not the Army that made you flee and killed a city of dragons, then what did?"

The water dragoness's eyes darted to her daughter, and she growled. "Cyril, in the old days you treasure so, what would happen with 'monsters' like my daughter, whose mere existence is supposedly a 'sin?'"

"They were to beâ€|" blue eyes widened, "burnt. Surely you're not claimingâ€|? You never mentioned that later..."

"Yes. Some young fire drakes were put to the task, after I'd exhausted my water element in healing. The supplies, wood and oil for the war caught easily. The mother had time to pass me her egg before she and it were to go up in smoke. Blood eggs take years to hatch, and when it was done, that is why I left. Tanarus and I saw a city of wounded go up in smoke due to the local royal bloodline and hotheaded, biased fools. And we had wanted a child. Better take one

that needed us and flee than bring another into this ancestor's-be-damned war."

* * *

><p>Spyro

"Hey, lunkhead, get up! You're squashing me."

Jab. Jab. Why was I so dizzy?

"Like a bug."

I shivered, twitching my head and trying to open my eyes. Everything felt light, like I was laying on thin airâ€"air which also filled my veins. My nerves sent tingles up my scales. I knew the symptoms; I was more anaemic than before. Great.

"Well," I muttered ruefully, "that makes sense."

"Huh?" Clearly he hadn't expected an answer.

"You are a bug."

"...Oh."

"Where are you? I don't want to crush you trying to get up. I'm incredibly dizzy at the moment."

"Under your left wing, dude. Move slow; that flying thing got you pretty good and you've just barely stopped bleeding."

Right. Captured. The why and how of it was a blur. Careful not to move too quickly, I straightened to lie on my belly and forced my eyes open. Sparks of remembrance hit my brain; I knew this cell. I'd thrown people in it. A cold feeling shivered down my spine. This was the last place I wanted to be. "We're at the Well of Souls."

Seeing we were alone, other than a few less-than-reassuring dark crystals, I spread my right wing sorely. It felt like every joint bent with a stubborn crack that reverberated straight to my headache. "I feel like I've met a cockatrice," I muttered as I worked the stiffened muscles. "And had a staring contest with it."

"I thought those things were fake?"

"They are very much real, though their famous stare only works on dragons." I glanced towards the bars and the empty corridor beyond, fear welling inside me. It was only a matter of time before they came back. "Have you seen an ape with a jewel for a fake eye?"

"Dude? I was stuck under your wing. They have no idea I'm here. I hope. Please tell me you saw Cyn make it out? Did she know I was under here? She's going to freakâ€!"

"I lost consciousnessâ€"probably blood-lossâ€"quickly. I have no idea what else was happening in there." I sighed, massaging the bridge of my muzzle with a paw. For all I knew, Cynder could have been captured too. But she was too resourceful for that.

"You gonna live?" Sparx buzzed, tilting his head and body, by grace of flight as he studied the crimson stains on my belly and lower sides. "You don't look good. At all. I've seen Cynder eating deer that bled less. But I saw something glowy through your wings and you've scarred up, so I think they gave you some of your wacky sparky sparky rocks."

I grumbled, stumbling to my paws half-heartedly and rolling my eyes. "Come up with some new material, Sparkly Sparkly Bugboy. We need to make a plan."

I held my paw aloft and willed fire over my pale, bloodless scales. Not even a spark. I glared ruefully at the dark crystals littering the cell, and realized the jarring wrench in my gut was not only a gift from bloodloss. They'd managed to sap my elements away, even with the dark crystal grown into my spine. The bars were stiff and sturdy steel, and I didn't bother to test them.

Unlike their grunts, or the Scavengers, the Dark Army's elite were no idiots. They wanted me, either for bait or as the General. Both thoughts wrenched at my weary heart. Even now, fear dragged at my scales as the dark crystal's presence wrenched my gut. But I didn't want to scare Sparx, so I endured in silence. Had I been alone, I'd have been terrified and useless by now.

But I wasn't. And that made all the difference in the word.

"Bugman, I need you to check for a keyhole in that thing. Carefully. Check for guards first."

"We getting of here, Violets?" he asked, and I felt a tentative hand rest right next to the base of my right horn.

"We're sure as the ancestors going to try."

50. PLEASE DON'T LEAVE ME

Cynder

I was tired. The fell chill of the ocean wind battered scales that felt half dead. I was stubborn enough to stay in front of Travix, even if it left me vulnerable should he choose to attack.

Damn it to hell, he was not going to see me crying. Though I wasn't ashamed of it, for once. If there was ever a reason to cry, this was it. Sparx was gone, and I felt dull and useless. I'd forgotten him and so it was my fault. He could have been hurt; that must have been why he didn't follow.

Of all the people I'd feared dying, he was never in their number. He was always so very, very vibrant, so very, very alive. I'd never thought that spark would, or could, splutter out.

One could never really love anything as much as they possibly could, not until it was gone and that love couldn't do damn good for anyone.

With all the endless killing, you'd think I'd finally be used to

death. I'd almost thought I was, but the death of family was worlds away from the death of an enemy. I'd always thought a broken heart was a silly and trivial saying, but my grief had welled into something solid and it was greedily dragging my heart down as it tore it apart.

I mistook the dizziness for another strange symptom of grief at first as my head began to spin, but it turned quite real as the world faded into deeper shades of gray before falling into night.

I barely heard Travix swear behind me.

* * *

><p>Something wasn't right. I jumped to the platform with the glowing portal and came to a rest on my belly, laying my chin on my paws.</p>

"A flash of lightning is born of the sky and its tempers, young dragoness."

"Don't give a crap," I muttered to my paws. "Go away. Please."

"You will need to learn to control your own emotions if you wish to wield the free spirit of electricity."

"Don't want to. I'm done dealing with you. You've only made everything worse."

"Young dragon, you _need _all of your elements to proceed."

"What if I don't want to 'proceed' anywhere you want me to go?"

"You must carry on. What has doused your spark, young one? I thought you would be stronger than this."

"Clearly nothing you give a flying fuck about, so please, please, _please, g_et the hell away from me. I'm gone through _enough o_f your shit."

I buried my eyes beneath my forepaws. "Clearly you're not gonna help me with anything that actually matters."

"Little dragon. Cease this foolishness and get up at o_nce."—

"No." I trained my ears upon my own heartbeat and focused on nothing. If falling asleep got me there, maybe falling asleep would get me back. I was not talking to this old traitorous idiot until I was there to cuss him off in the flesh, on even grounds.

"Whatever has happened, I do not even know of it, much less how it is my fault."

My heart beat a steady rhythm, and it reminded me of the buzz of beating wings. Of a light that never went out. Of bright eyes and a still brighter smile.

"If you are going to stay there, you will do little good for anybody."

Of hands that didn't always feel so tiny rubbing my nose. I'd been terribly sick once upon a time, and he wouldn't leave my side then. He'd worn himself out an awful lot that week, with great hooded eyes and a glow fading with exhaustion. I don't think he'd slept once.

Half dreaming, I swear twiggy arms wrapped around my muzzle and held it tight. My eyelids were heavy, my aching joints weak. The Chronicler's monologue was far away and fading faster. It was no longer a challenge to weed that voice from my mind. I just didn't care what he had to say. Didn't trust him to help me save Spyro; didn't trust him to _want to help me save Spyro.

"Please don't leave me." That was last thing I heard myself murmur before the darkness of sleep took me back to the waking realm. My voice was small and weak; broken and lonely. It was the last thing I wanted heard.

But still, for once, I didn't care.

51. FAMILY: LOST AND FOUND

-?--

"Well, that went well,_ Crawlacker_."

"You are a guardian. You should act like it, not be pulled into childish pranks."

"Heh. Before the war, we were teachers, and children rarely learn without fun. If you must lead without it showing, subtlety is the key."

"You wish to try?"

"Unless you feel like shutting up the riddles of doom and opening the door, do I have a choice?"

"Very well, if you must."

I flicked the tip of my tail scythe at him decisively. "Watch. You lack a ness's touch." My lithe neck turned as I shot a glare. "Or a mother's. Did you even ask what was wrong?"

"Do you believe it is something beyond Spyro's capture?"

"Cyn's tough. It would take more than that," I said grimly.

* * *

><p>-Spyro-

"Well, that didn't work."

"No, really?" I grumbled tiredly. "How many times have you tried that?"

"Forty-two."

"Wow, bugman. I had no idea you could count that high."

"I did get this, though!" He proffered a roll of white something, grinning from cheek-to-cheek.

"...And this helps why?"

"No idea! But I heard some ape needed it really bad, so I stole it. It must be important."

"...Sparx. I realize you lived in a swamp and don't know much about bipeds, but do you really not know of the existence of toilet paper?"

"Is it some kind of weapon?" the bug asked hopefully.

My head met the floor. "Yes, sure, sparkles. I'm sure toilet paper will solve alllll our problems."

"Really?"

"No."

* * *

><p>-Cynder-

"Vell, hello there, shleeping beauty."

Just the voice I wanted to wake up to in the morning. That was before I realized I was pressed up against a rather spiked chest. With a rumbling growl, I snapped both wingblades up and in until they pierced scale and I was dropped. Catching the air with stiff wings, I whirled to face Travix. "The hell, bloodboy?"

"Vhat did you vant from me, neshie? I vould be _happy _to let you drown nexst time."

I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment. Bigger problems. Like Spyro; I couldn't lose him. Not like I'd lost Sparx.

"If I ever meet you in better circumstances, you will die," I muttered tiredly. "Where are we?"

"I can go no further, princessh. Continue that vay and you'll reach Sir High-and-Mighty'sh island. Now, I trushted you to bring you here; hear me out before you leave."

I was too exhausted to comment that his stuttering wingbeats lent credence to his claim. He looked like he wouldn't make it much farther, and hovering while carrying me beneath him would have been more difficult than flying with the wind that lent fleetness to our path.

"Fine," I muttered.

"You shee, I vas not alwaysh alone. My family vas caught and exshecuted in a city long ago, and they had an egg with them. I vould very much like to know vhat happened to it. It did not burn with them, as I shaw the pyre. The foolish broke and burnt the city,

killing ush monshters, but if any should know of the little one'sh fate, the Chronicler should.

"You spent ancestors knows how long in that place fighting to find them? What about if the people you killed had brothers or sisters too?" I growled, irritation clawing past the numbness freezing my chest.

The older dragon merely shrugged. "The vorld has done little for me. I will regret my meansh when they start to worry over me, and not an inshtant sooner."

"How 'bout this. I'll do what I can to find out what happened to that egg, and you don't kill anyone that's not Dark Army? There's no shortage of food there," I said, though my stomach twisted at the thought. Even ignoring their sentience, the thought of eating the apes with their ranced fur was repulsive.

"Haven't I done enough for you, hero girl?" he asked with dark eyes. "I keep my promises, and that ish not one I vish to keep. The Dark Army may be your enemy, and I care little for them, but neither has the alliance ever been my friendsh. Your alliance, nesshie, not the Dark Army, burned my parents and my home. My parents vould no more kill them for it than you vould. They healed who they could, and died shneaking within the infirmary to heal thoshe who clearly desherved no help. I am to dragonsh as I imagine the Dark Army'sh apes are to you."

"You don't have to go out of your way for it, though. Leave those who don't attack you alone. That is the bargain, Travix." I realized grimly that it was most likely the first time I'd used his name. "You are protecting no one and in no war. Leave well enough alone, or you'll just feed the hate that killed your parents."

A snarl interupted me. "Nesshie, hate ish not my enemy! The dragonsh and the catsh and anything elshe who decide ve are to be killed jusht for being born _are._"

"I am sorry for that, but I'm no one to speak for my raceâ€"I barely know them. I was raised with a family who would have no clue who and what you are, just like I didn't. They weren't perfect either. But I..." I whipped my head to look away from him, fighting my tears tooth and claw. "Many of them hated me for how much I eat, and that I could snap them in half by accident. Still, I hate the idea of coming home and telling them Sparx is gone. I cannotâ€"will notâ€"see other families shatter like that. Perhaps this little dragon you seek, should it still live, would be better off without someone like you. I will only take that risk if you promise me this."

His eyes hardened to steel. "Fine. If that ish vhat it musht be, then that ish vhat it vill be. I exshpect shome sort of sign from old-bones or his asshistant. Should that not come to passh, you've no deal. Goodbye, nesshie."

With force I didn't think he still had, he whipped around and sped into the wind. My eyes stung as I looked into the wind after him.

At least, I think it was the wind.

52. THE MANY USES OF TOILET PAPER

Spyro

I glanced at the pile of crud Sparx had previously thought might be important, consisting of a small canteen of water, an ape's fur comb, some playing cards coated with a strange material the apes had discovered through excessive use of burning oil for war machines, a box of toothpicks and a few strands from a broom.

Sparx hovered over my head, so weary that his glow had long since faded to a few sparkles.

"What really gets me is that there's those blow-up-y sticks right next store," he muttered dejectedly. "But it's heavier than I ever thought it'd be. I can't move it and it'd be perfect."

"The apes have always had a precariously lax protocol for explosives and a love for long fuses--the strings that attach to the bombs. Did you see any fuses?"

"None."

I sighed, fixing my gaze back upon the pile of wasted effort. The toilet paper caught my eye. "I have an idea."

The thrill of coming victory sparked Sparx's cheer, and he went off like the bulb of an oil-lamp above my head.

"Buggy, how nimble are your hands?"

"I can catch a butterfly flying as fast as I can without messing up the wings. Your point?"

I stuck one claw through the roll and proffered it to my insectine friend. "Pull and twist, be careful not to break it. Keep going until you get to the dynamite stores!"

...

I'd never heard a more satisfying explosion in my life, past sins with the General's bloodlust included. I grinned with my filed teeth as the wall splintered into pieces, hiding Sparx behind me. Rubble crashed to the floor in a cacophonous rumble and shattered the dark gems littering the room. Shadow magic removed, they splintered into true spirit gems and flooded into my hide just quick enough for me to draw earth power into my horns.

Racing forward as my side healed, green light adorned my horns as I rammed my head into the rubble and jerked it sideways--bringing what used to be a stone wall with it. It tumbled into the hallway and formed a hole on the side that led to the barracks.

No time to lose, I dashed from the cell, only looking back to be sure Sparx was trailing behind me. He was grinning devilishly and pounding one fist into his other palm. "Hell yeah! Don't forget the little guy!"

I smirked, turned my head around, and ran like hell was chasing me. The old stone floor scraped my paws, and I was forced to come to a

halt by a corridor, claws screeching as I skidded to a stop.

Green light flooded inches from my forepaws with a faint venomous hiss that sent ice through my blood and bones. I barely caught Sparx with a wing.

"What is that?" the golden dragonfly asked tensely. "And it was going so well, too!"

"There's always time," I muttered tersely. "Stay right behind my head. I can take a hit from this, you can't."

Why didn't I know Dragon Time?

Drawing power into my chest, I pulled earth to form a spherical shield around me before hardening it into a boulder. The weight of the magic pulled at me. "Quick," I muttered.

That was not a fun few minutes. Vibration never did all that much for me. I careened from wall to wall with crashes that jarred my shoulders and sent jabs of pain through the remaining bruises in my sides that the spirit gems had not fully healed. I felt a grab at the base of one of my backblades as Sparx threw dignity to the wind and held on for life and limb.

I burst from the corridor panting heavily, only to find myself facing another. The deadly green beam haunted it as well.

"Great," I muttered. "We need a new tactic. Preferably before the apes catch us."

* * *

><p>-Myst-

After Ignitus and Terrador arrived, things had little choice but to calm down. Terrador's 'I am disappointed in you' look was sufficient to fell an elephant, and Iggie had a way of looking at you just right to make it twist in your chest.

I didn't know how Cynder was so immune.

Viriti, Marina and Tanarus settled about as well as could be hoped for, though Marina and Cyril avoided each other like the living plague. Viriti, on the other paw, avoided nobody. She bounced around like a wrecking ball, talking a mile a minute to anyone she bumped intoâ€"regardless of their thoughts on her. Her enthusiasm could bring a smile to the coldest heart, and I just couldn't bring myself to fear the hyperactive ball of fur and scale. How was she older than me?

The first time I walked in on her with her teeth buried in Tanarus' forepaw, I could do little but stop and stare. She had become Viriti to me by then, not a blood dragon. But seeing her eatâ€"or perhaps drink was the better wordâ€"from another sentient being sent a cold wave cascading down my spine. Tanarus just sat stoic, sad quiet eyes refocusing from her to me.

They were feared for a reasonâ€! How could I ever forget?

But when she looked at me and her ears drooped, I could feel my heart shatter with hers.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. And then she turned to trail from the room as Tanarus looked upon me with traces of anger, pity, and the most profound sadness I would ever come to know.

The great dragon lowered his huge head to me, eyes pleading. "Go after her?"

It was a request I could not deny.

I trailed through the cold temple, finding her in the room she shared with her adoptive family, now barren of any life.

"Viri." Apparently the nickname had stuck a long time ago, and resisting picking it up from her parents had been a futile task.

"What?" Her voice should have been bitter, but it wasn't. Just tired and sad. Her usual zeal for life had flooded from her. She turned to look at me with a dripping beard of blood.

"I'm sorry I froze. Should'a realized you have to get food somewhere like the rest of us. S'not your fault you need sentient blood, right?"

"Thanks, but I know better," she said tiredly. "Eating anything that can think is the worst crime to dragons. It's why you all hate us. If you're worried about what I'll do when I'm too big to just take a bit, don't be." She turned to place her paws on the cracked window sill and laid her head on them. "I'll let myself die before killing that many dragons."

That admission cracked and scorched my heart, and I cursed myself for not thinking of it sooner. She was worse off than me and my fury. Without a dozen or so dragons willingly granting her blood when she was an adultâ€|she could only attack or starve. And new friend or not, I knew her well enough to be well aware that she couldn't hurt a disease-riddled fly.

Even to put it out of its misery.

"Hey," I said weakly, pacing forward and draping a wing around her as best I could, like Cyn would do for me. "I'll be around to help you figure it out then too, 'kay? Momma used to say that a dragon's will is stronger than any blast of fire, earth, or anything else."

A friendship was formed that day, and I knew in my heart of hearts that it was one that would last.

When she turned to look at me, her heart and its gratitude was written plainly in her ruby gaze.

* * *

><p>-Cynder-

After alighting upon the cold island beach, I gathered myself and tried to stoke the rage that had once scorched at my belly. It didn't

come easily. Usually, the island would seem beautiful. The endless ocean threw a blue ambience to the air. Though the air was heavy, it carried an ancient call that reminded me of the dead; a beautiful menagerie of sorrow and joy all at once. My eyes widening, I subconsciously tried to pick up anything familiar. I swore for a moment I heard the rustle of wings and the muttering of old man Flickershine, a dragonfly who had been kind to me as a child. Heart in my throat, I searched for my brother's voice in the fleeting whispers.

It did not come.

With Sparx gone, the world fell into shades of grey. I knew why things had seemed black and white before, why I had rightly wanted to gut the idiot who called himself the 'Chronicler', but it didn't feel like my petty hatred mattered all that much anymore.

Except, if it wasn't for him, Spyro would still be with me. Sparxâ€œ! Him too. A growl rumbled at my throat. If it hadn't been for this damned goosechase, which we'd gained nothing from, I could have been with Myst and Iggie now. I'd have been worrying over Cyril and Volteer getting me stuck with a migraine rather than people and friends dying.

Fire licked within my chest once again as I angled my wings and dove into the bubble of syrupy air, ignoring that it seemed to morph into something much thicker. The flight passed quickly in a blurred cacophony of anger after that, and I was grateful for it.

Worries about what I was going to do took the place of worries about if I could do anything at all. Heavy winds beat at my face and wings in an almost therapeutic rage. I didn't give a damn about the tainted shadows tracing at my claws and wingtips.

Whatever it took, I didn't want to be alone anymore.

My paws landed on cool clammy sand with each step as I faced a towering fortress of cold stone disguised as something serene. Giant stones served as walls, and it was in a state of serene disarray, a combination that made no sense but managed to describe it. It matched the stone structures in my dreams, and I shivered in the thick air. It would be hard to fly here, like in my dreams. I grinned with much more emphasis to my teeth than needed.

"Come and meet me in hell," I snarled to the building. Squaring my shoulders, I paced forward, lying to myself about the shadow creeping at my paws. Who the hell cared anymore?

Whatever worked.

I wasn't about to lose Spyro too.

53. NIGHT OF REPENTANCE

It was yet another week passed of worrying for Cynder when Kuro pulled me away, tail twitching conspiratorially. I followed him with a tilted head and a leaping heart at seeing the strange hope in his eyes. It was like the blind seeing the sun for the very first time. And I'd know.

"Okay," I whispered after we'd spirited ourselves away in the more rubble-filled part of the temple. "What's happened and why's it so wonderful?"

He winked mischievously, grinning with his teeth for the first time I could remember since my childhood. "What do you know about the Night of Eternal Darkness?"

"That it's big and it's bad and it's scary. Or something," I said, more than a little confused. "...Why?"

"Because. Myssy, I've been reading up on it in the little library. It's not evil by nature. After a dragon dies, their spirit, bound to their element, remains and helps fuel and guide the world to new beginnings. Yes, the Night of Eternal Darkness lets the dark spirits of the dead roam free from the pits of hell they are drawn to, such as the Well of Souls and the great shadow rifts, but any other spirit strongly bound to the world gains the same power to materialize."

"Kuri, there's got to be a reason everyone stays in that night. Not just around those places. I just don't think it's safe for some reason."

He shrugged his lanky forelegs. "But why? Friendly spirits aren't about to hurt anyone if they return, and the murdered tend to be the most restless and thus likely to show up. What about a whole village murdered in cold blood? Every dragon, ness and child. Where would they go?"

Home.

"You want to see everybody againâ€|" I murmured as my heart fluttered longingly within my chest.

"Yes! Your parents, mine. Flareth, Geodan, Ellerith, Zephith, Inferus, Gale, Emberlin, all of them! They'd all come to where they felt their home was." He turned his head to me. "Umbrous and Zenna, too, with everyone else."

My parent's faces sprang to mind and dug into my heart with stubborn claws. All the faces that had blurred; the names that had fled my mindâ€| Those dragons I'd never taken proper time to remember. Ancestors, I could write them, leave something, remind everyone. Remind them of a village who would sacrifice their lives for a society that had shunned themâ€|

"Iâ€|" My voice fluttered off with my heart behind it. "W-what about the dangerous spirits that roam on the Night of Eternal Darkness? We wouldn't be safe getting there."

"Then we go before the night. We get to the village while it's safe, and wait. By the time any beasties are about, our friends would be there to keep us safe." His long muzzle brushed against my forehead. "_Please, _Myst. I'm going no matter what, but I don't want to face them all aloneâ€|"

He was afraid, and I didn't have to ask the cause. What if Mom and Dad didn't like that I was fighting now? What if they hated me for

itâ€>? They'd hated the violence of the war, hated the killing, hated how worthless war made life seem.

It was only rightâ€ I'd become everything they hated, and I didn't regret the killing I did in defence. Not like Cyn did. Should I? Mourn every loss? Every injury inflicted? They attacked me, threatened my friends, threatened the world. Wasn't that worth fighting for? It was for me, but what would they say?

I had to knowâ€ Had to ask. Cynder wasn't there and everyone else was too weathered by this war to tell me from an unscarred heart. I needed people away from the war, away from the endless fighting, to tell me if it was all really okay.

I wanted Mom and Dad with all my heart, with a deep fierce ache that wrangled the doubts and pulled them into the swirling eddies of my grief, where they were drowned out and forgotten.

I pawed forward, laying my head against my old friend's chest and wrapping my wings around him to hook the curved blades behind his neck. "'Course I'll come, Kuri. Wouldn't miss it for the world. No matter what."

His warm wings cushioned me, enshrouding me from the world as he placed his nose to my forehead, his shining eyes holding me like Dad's once had. There was a lot of my dad I could see in him, and I couldn't help but wonder if he remembered seeing Dad hold me like this.

It was the same. A gift. A memory.

I slumped, relaxed, and lost myself in the old times. The times I hoped to see again come the Night of Eternal Darkness.

Our night of repentance. Our night of hope.

His wings tightened around me until all the light was gone away, and I couldn't help but think the dark wasn't so bad anymore. I'd been afraid ever since I got my sight back, afraid that I was going blind again with every fleeting moment of darkness.

But if blind was always like this, it wouldn't be so bad at all.

It didn't take me long to fall asleep to the rustle of light paws outside. I think Kuro beat me there.

* * *

><p>(AN:

See what such nice quick reviewing last chap gets you, my lovely readers? The more reviews, the more interested I tend to be in a story and the more I write! I want to become a real author and your opinion matters to me! More reviews are liable to keep spawning quicker updates!)

"Who the heck is this old guy? I feel like statues of him are everywhere! Why would they be at the temple and here of all places?" Sparx asked from my shoulder as I crouched behind the head of a giant golden statue of Malefor, towering over the huge room. I snorted.

"Hush; whisper. But this..." I gestured to the statue with one wing, "is the Dark Master. So are the statues in the temple. I've asked Ignitus in the past what they are and why they're there, but he didn't know."

"The Dark Master is a dragon!?" Sparx responded, dinner-plate-wide eyes confused. "Why? How?"

"I don't know too much, but I do know he's a purple dragon. I've seen him reflected in dark crystalsâ€"he seems to use them to communicate with his troops. It's how he possessed The General, too. Through this." I reached back a claw to tap the shard of malicious crystal embedded in my neck. "Why he can't seem to anymore, I don't know, but thank the Ancestors for it!"

"I know you can't pull it out, but could you break the end off or something? Does size change how powerful the thing is?"

"Maybe. Too nervous to try. The only experts on dark crystals are hardly going to advise me. And if there's one with the alliance, the guardians don't know of them. I do know dark crystals are tainted spirit gems, and spirit gems are some sort of manifestation of the ancestors. Maybe they can go dark just like normal dragons can."

"Powerful as you guys are, a lot of crap seems to happen to you. I think I like my nice simple buggy magic compared to your glowy face-shooting stuff."

"Eloquent," I assessed sarcastically. "I think I hear something. Let's keep quiet for now. I need to rest my element before we can make it through any more of those Ancestors-forsaken rays."

A giant burly ape hulked into the room below with four of its brethren. Something was bound between them, and from the little I risked peeking, it seemed to be a feline. From my high perch, I could just make out that its head was bound in a sack so it stood blind, and its arms were bound to its chest. Body shape vaguely suggested female, black fur suggested a panther.

"Ah, so you did find it." The burly apeâ€"a great mass of matted gray furâ€"stepped toward the prisoner. "Shame we lost it for so long. We mighta caught her sooner if the lot of you whelps weren't half-assed in your speed. Woulda been useful incentive_before_ the purple lizard escaped."

I recognized the hulking creatureâ€"he was one of Gaul's commanders. Thuggish, brunt, and brusk. I almost pitied the smaller apes. But his words caught me, and I squinted at the prisoner. What would catching a random feline have to do with me in the least? I'd feel bad for leaving any sentient creature here, of course, but it was more important that the Dark Army remain without their General.

"And you." The beast swung its head, spittle drenching a matted chin. "Such loyalty to leave the brat to rot. Some mother." A large hand forced her head up as he pulled the sack off with the other.

And there was fire in those eyes, sputtering but true. One cheek bore a strange blue strip of fur. Her lips pulled back to reveal white teeth. "My means and ends mean little to you. And I remember you well. You were much less prideful running from a dragon _hatchling_."

A great hand came crashing forward, sending her sprawling across the floor in a flash of motion that dug and tore at my chest more than it should for a stranger. Who was she? What was it about her that made me feel like this? Sweat had coated my scales by now, and I had to fight against a growl that fought to rumble through my chest. Sparx glanced at me, peering through another gap in Malefor's golden horns with clear confusion. I ignored him, focused upon the cat I could not possibly know.

A filthy hand pressed her down further as the harsh face leaned in. "I would hold your tongue, Terra. You were a tool to an end then, and you still are, ain't ya? You don't have children to threaten to starve themselves for you anymore, so I would hold my tongue if I was you."

"Well then." Her features were hard as she turned to glare with roiling pits of blue fire. "It is a good thing I am not you, and it is a good thing I have no child to worry for now, isn't it?"

The second strike was strong enough to send her flying again, straight into a chunk of stone that rose from the floor. She now faced the statue's side, and I could feel her gaze like warm fire dancing across my scales. Our eyes met for mere moments, and it seemed like pain came to hers at my look of confusion.

Who are you? What are you to me? Why are you here?

But she flashed into motion moments later. To the apes, the mad dash probably looked like a desperate bid for escape.

I knew better. She did not run to the doors, but to the other side of the room—the one where they could not catch sight of us from. Her pursuers had no reason to go anywhere else, and our hiding spot remained secure at the cost of another fair few beatings for the 'escape attempt.'

Who was she to have such loyalty to me? Why did the sight of her beaten rise a deep growl to my chest that I had to prevent?

When they were gone, I laid my head down and tried not to cry too loudly. Whether it was because of what I saw, or just because I didn't know why it had affected me so, I would never know.

* * *

><p>Cynder

The first room when I entered was very blue. Watery light exuded through the place, and I was disturbed to find my wings heavy. I

could jump and glide, but flight hung beyond my grasp. With a growl of frustration, I made my way up an unstable fallen pedestal and around through a crack in the wall to the next room. The scenery I would have usually found to be pretty damn impressive, but I just...didn't care.

I passed through more rooms, all a different hue. The next place seemed to consist of ice and the gaping nothing I'd grown disturbingly accustomed to.

Then, go figure, stone things attacked like in the dreams. I tried to ignore them, but dodging attacks only worked for so long. I didn't want to turn back, so I turned on them and blasted them to pieces, shooting a sphere of water at each. It absorbed into their cold stone bodies, only to make them colder when it froze into jagged icicles.

Woo. Water expanding. Joy.

With the stone things exterminated, platforms sank to make a path. I leapt across them, through a door and some lovely beams of magic, and into another room full of stone soldiers. I tore the stone apart with my earth element and ran on.

The damned place seemed to blend together after that. In the temple, out of the temple; fire creaturesâ€"go figure, they hate my water breath. Dumping a puddle around them and watching them writhe as first their feet, then legs, then haunches and so on sputtered into air was about as enjoyable as anything could be right then. I didn't care how the dark fire bathed my paws.

Sparx was gone. Spyro soon might be too if I didn't stop it.

I couldn't let that happen. I was numb; an ice that wasn't my own nipped at my paws and chased me with a vicious persistence. An ice that hid beneath the mirage of shadows. I couldn't outrun it. I didn't want to. Numb was better than the grief that mauled at me.

I paced into another gargantuan room, and a hauntingly familiar voice shattered the silence and sparked in my frozen-over heart.

"Sacred threshold, hallowed ground, where paths unfold and those lost might be found."

The fire kindled over my heart and expanded, chasing the shadows and their ice away. The hopelily scorched at my chest, but it was the pain that came with sweet clarity.

Kaboa.

"First prove your worth with quick desire. Wind, ice and earth, electric, fireâ€|."

Wait. Damn itâ€| No...

"You'reâ€|you're with him." The cold was back, the shadows writhing. "All this timeâ€| _He's_ your 'boss?'"

Strange dead spiders ran at me, beasts formed of crystal and metal.

The first shot of fire was enough to melt both. The vibration of my earth-empowered legs meeting stone floor sent a vibration that shattered the others, along with the spirit gems and strange pedestals in the room. I glared at the door before me, a great feral snarl building in my chest.

I didn't even mean for the shadow fury to encase me as I ran for the door. I perfectly intended to power my headbutt with enough earth element to shatter solid stone. But the shadow, my actual shadows, took hold instead. They seemed to resonate from the burning silver lily at my throat.

In a move I didn't know to try, I dove into my own shadow and under the door just as one long metal leg nudged my tail blade. But then I was through. Many of the homing spirit gems had been absorbed, but I could hear several colliding with the stone behind me, thudding against locked doors.

I stared forward with a deep fury that burrowed into my bones with claws so cold they burned. My chest burned with it; a different kind of fire that fought the numbing shadows. A paw reached up, and I broke the chain around my neck. I was already running by the time I heard the light clatter of seemingly delicate silver on stone.

"I trusted you with_ everything._"

I leapt into the air, and glowing purple paws pulverized a floating book before me.

"I thought you'd be thereâ€|"

I raced into a room with four doors, guarded by what I'd read to be sealing stones. They were made to seal something until a certain goal was met, something that would release enough of whichever element's magic to break it.

I blasted the fire stone until it was nothing more than molten rock. Ignitus had said once that a dragon going dark could sever the boundaries of elemental magic just as surely as the General's poison could, creating a flux of magic. It could shatter locks in dragon's souls that were there as the ancestors' precaution, locks that had been made so that we couldn't abuse our powers for too long.

"Not like this." Earth-powered headbutt met another set of stones, shattering them to rubble.

"Never like this." Water met the other two until ice shattered them from within, each consecutive blast enough to overload the binds and obliterate whatever magic they held. What had these 'Ancestors' ever done for me? I only knew that they had betrayed me or never cared in the first place.

I came to a stop before the last seals, inscribed in yellow. I dug deep in my gut and tried to wrench the power back again. It had only been sleeping.

I swear I saw two topaz eyes flash fire as the faint power was torn from my grasp. _'No._'

I snarled and fought the topaz glare, dragging at my power, wanting to take it back from whatever had stolen it.

_ ' _ You're wrong. This was my power and my gift. You will not travel this path, you will not face this fate. You shall not have it. ' _

Furious, I struck the beam closest to me first with ice and then with fire-laced claws. It did nothing.

I turned desperately, searching for another path. The only ones left were the one lined with the short yellow spires and the sealed door I'd entered from.

55. HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

Cynder

"We do not demand your faith." Thunder sounded to my right. I whipped around to see yellow and blue light blossoming in the stale air as a bolt of lightning twice my width scarred the earth.

"We do not demand your trust." The earth rumbled under my paws, and autumn leaves, dust and petals formed a whirlwind that flurried past me as green light bloomed behind me. A growl worked to escape my throat.

"We do not demand your obedience." Fire lanced upon the stone as a wave of heat exploded from the sudden inferno that flared to life to my left.

"We do not even demand your thanks." Stone cracked as water surged upwards from it, forming spines of towering icicles as rain and snow whipped into a flurry in the air.

Four elements converged into themselves and became the towering forms of dragon spirits with eyes of glowing stone. Those eyes fixated on me.

"However," four ethereal booming voices spoke as one, "we do demand that you serve your purpose."

"There are many sentient beings on this planet." The green slender construct stepped forward, and I drew into myself, my wingtips quivering as the growl died in my throat. "Beings with brothers, beings with sisters. Beings with family just like you bear."

"Siblings, parents and friends that war razes to the ground without worry or care." The fire being's head delved down to meet my gaze, and heat burrowed into my scales.

"Beings with a common goal to protect those they love." Frost formed with each of the towering ice creature's steps. "They are forced to wait and pray that the war will end."

"But it is you that can meet their goal and quell their fears." Thunder rumbled with each step of the lightning spirit. "You who can heal the world and you that can take a stand for all of them. Only

then can the blood cease to flow and the pain stop."

"We care not for your feelings," the ice giant hissed.

"But we do care for the world," the green being continued.

"And the path lies with the Chronicler. If you do not listen, then the world will perish."

"Cyn..."

I wheeled around. A pale white being stared at me with violet eyes. Unlike the voids I had become so used to seeing on that face, there was sorrow in those eyes. "Cyn, this isn't the way to help anyone. I don't know what happened, but a lot of people need you to help them, and you can't do it like this."

"M-Myst?"

* * *

><p>Myst

_ "__Come and join me in hell__"

I'd been dizzy for a little under an hour, huddled miserably in my room. Something felt very, very wrong. But every time I tried to cry for help, I couldn't seem to find my voice. Every time I tried to stand, vertigo stopped me. I hoped Viriti or Kuro would come looking for me soon.

It felt like my stomach rested on the stone with my belly, but my head was miles and miles above anywhere it had any right to be. When I closed my eyes and tried hard to think, I heard snarling and thrashing, the shattering of rock, the hiss of fire, and the roar of thunder. It came in periods of jumbled rushing and dragging slow sounds.

I covered my eyes with my paws, my chin rubbing against a rough patch of stone with every flinch.

"Myst?" A grey head poked into the room. "__Myst!__"

I felt a small paw on my shoulder. "What's wrong?"

I groaned in protest as one paw was dragged away from my eyes and Viriti slipped her pad against mine, gripping it carefully. "Squeeze my paw if you can hear me, c'monc'monc'mon__"

It took way more focus than it should have to comply. I curled my toes in half-heartedly and heard a sigh of relief.

"I want you to poke with this toe__" she nudged the one closest to my body "for yes, middle for maybe or don't know, third for no. Kay?"

I gave her the "yes" poke. I could feel something smooth against my forehead, then my wrist, and I heard her counting as she held it.

"Did you eat anything funny?" she asked, and I could hear her deliberately trying to keep herself from speaking too fast.

No.

"Anything today?"

No. I had a few more days before I had to eat again, thank goodness. I had no doubt that anything I'd eaten would have been on the floor by now.

"Drunk anything besides the water in our stream?"

No again.

"Okay, Myssy, I'm gonna bite your shoulder a bit. We can sorta taste sickness in the blood. It'll only hurt a bit but it might make it hard to move. That's normal so don't get scared, kay-kay? I'd call Mommy or Dad, but they're out huntingâ€|"

"Child?" I heard an old weathered voice and felt a hand on my muzzle. "Viriti, what has befooled little windspitter?"

Then I heard Thistle's gruff voice spitting things out in the ape's guttural language. Though I didn't understand the words, his worry was clear.

"I don't know," Viriti hissed desperately. "And Cyril's the only dragon here and he's not gonna help! He'll just say I hurt her!" The panic in her voice was clear. "Can you pull a wing away from her shoulder for me? I need to check her blood and that's a place near the heart that scabs extra fast, 'cause the special blood for wing wounds goes there a lot. Gently, Thistle."

Rough hands took my wing and pulled it, treating it like glass as it was pried from its tight place against my side. I felt myself whine as Viriti pulled her paw from mine, unwrapping my clutching toes with her other paw. Dazedly, I realized I wasn't scared of her now, even with the prospect of her teeth digging into me.

When did that happen? The trust was strong for just knowing her for a few weeksâ€| But how could anyone be afraid who got a chance to know her?

Heavy paws pressed on my shoulders and there was a piercing pain in my neck, but it numbed just as quickly. I could still feel, but there was a tingling sensation in my shoulders and spreading. I felt her damp tongue on the small wounds, and then the weight was gone.

But the tingling numbness wasn't; it stayed to fight off the pain. I remembered Viri telling me their teeth could do thatâ€"numb and keep things still.

"She doesn't taste sick," Viri said tiredly. "And her pulse isn't faster than normal since she seems scared, and she's not too hot or cold!"

By then, the world was spinning worse than ever.

"Then perhaps she isn't. You dragons are a strange folk with many connections to those who have passed on. Maybe they call to her like they called to her Cynder. Myst told me much of her before you arrived. She became dizzy and fainted before your dragon's Chronicler called."

_ "I trusted you with everything!" _

...Cynder?

"But what if something's wrong? Shouldn't I do something?" Viriti's voice was beginning to shake out of focus.

"Wonder if that not right question," Thistle rumbled in broken dragon-tongue. "Real question: is something you can do help?"

And then I was somewhere else. I could still hear the worried voices behind me, but there was Cynder in front of me, wreathed in shadow and running, leaping to destroy something that was in front of her. The scenery was blackened and distorted, but I could see every shadow that tangled against her scales. It was the first clear vision I'd had. For a moment I couldn't feel my body in the temple, only wind tearing at scales that weren't there.

"I..." I muttered, as the world flashed back into focus and I had clarity for a moment. "I see Cynâ€|"

"Vision or hallucination," Viriti muttered to herself. One gentle toe lifted my eyelid for a moment, and my secondary eyelid blinked shut. I heard Viriti sigh. "It's a vision. Dunno why it's being like this, thoughâ€|"

"See, Viriti? You have learned much, but panic becomes no bedside. She merely needs to fall asleep so she will stop fighting what visions seek to come. Then we will be wiser to your old ones' wishes, and she will heal."

I felt a hand gently pry my mouth open, and something bitter against by tongue. I tried to spit the foreign taste away, but it lingered. And then I wasn't there anymore.

Cynder was back, bathed in light from four creatures formed of flame, ice, earth and electricity.

I don't know how I knew what to do.

56. YOU LOOK FABULOUS, SUGAR

Myst

It was strange, but incredible. The stone was laced with flashes of green and the wind with flowing blue streams of light that felt like home. Cynder was there at the center of the elemental sentinels. She was bathed in purpleâ€"tinted shadow that ate at her like fire. Immersed under her scales were sparkling orbs of light, mostly hidden by the darkness serving as her shell.

It was terrifying. But it wasn't all I could feel as I fought to look away from my best friend. I could feel a sadness twisting through the

air around her, a heavy aura that pulled down at me. This wasn't due to gems; this was something deeper and much more painful. I stepped forward, heart lurching. "Cyn, this isn't the way to help anyone. I don't know what happened, but a lot of people need you to help them and you can't do it like this."

"M-Myst?" She was shaking under the piercing light of the four other beings, and my heart dropped when she backed away. "You can't be real. You're not an ancestorâ€| You're not_ dead!_"

I blinked, staring at my paws. I could not see any flesh, only curling coils of wind. "...I don't get it either," I muttered tiredly. "I thought I was dreaming. I kept seeing you running through this place alone, and then I fell asleep and I was hereâ€|"

I couldn't mention the apes or Viriti right now. With Cynder like this, it was a bad idea. There was a numbness coursing through me, an odd detachment. I was barely afraid, barely sad. I should have been terrified. I had been the last time I'd seen her like this. "But I know I'm not dead."

I think. Hopefully. Not being dead was a plus.

Four glares met me and I had the distinct feeling that I wasn't necessarily a welcomed member of the club of weird element constructed things. The numbness was flowing away and odd memories flashed in the depth of my mind.

_ " __Come and join me in hell! __"

_ " __Nesshie, hate ish not my enemy! The dragonsh and the catsh and anything elshe who decide ve are to be killed jusht for being born are. __"

_ " __C'mon, Sparx, Let's get the hell outta hereâ€| __"

_ " __**SPARX! ** __"

The last scream lingered where my bones should have been and tore at my heart.

I saw the last few days; her last few days. It was no surprise I was crying. I hadn't been all that close to Sparx, but I certainly cared for him. I ran forward and, where my strange ethereal paws touched as I wrapped them around Cyn's neck, the shadows were chased away.

Her chin was warm on my forehead and for a moment my skin felt real. I forced myself to file Travix away for later. I'd heard that story before. I knew who he was looking for.

I wasn't sure if he should find her, though.

"Cyn, they're right." I forced myself to draw my wracking breaths in slowly, though they burned my throat with waiting sobs. "This has to stop. Brothers and sisters and parents and friends. Everyone has those, and they all need you. Everyone can lose them. You can't help everyone like this."

"And why not?" Her voice was bitter even as she pulled me closer,

falling into a sitting position with a faint thud. "Myst, it hurts. I don't think I can do much of anything like I amâ€¡"

"'Course you can," I muttered into her shoulder. I felt her tears on my back as she slumped into me, leaving me mystified that I didn't feel the slightest bit squashed. "You're strong, Cyn, stronger than anyone, and you can do it. We're all in here." I pressed my paw to her chest. "Fighting with you as best we can. Sparx too. You just have to work with us."

"I'm sorry." The bridge of Cynder's muzzle met my shoulder. I could only try to comfort her as she cried.

* * *

><p>Spyro

"Now what?" Sparx sat stubbornly on my muzzle.

I sighed tiredly. "I think we just have to keep trying to get out. Whoever she is, she can't be more important than the lives at risk if we leave." Guilt and horror swam in my bones. "I think it's just what we have to do. And all that is beside the fact that you are in grave danger here. I've no magic-imbued bag to protect you with, and this isn't somewhere you can just hide. In a few days, all hell will be breaking loose. There will be spirits and ghosts wandering all through here and I can't remember how to navigate anything except that the closest exit is the same way as Gaul, which isn't going to work, regardless."

"But we can't just leave her, can we? You know you want answers, and I'm sure Cynder's managed to get the Chronicler to spiel some magic schit to help her find us by now! We don't want her to come here and have to go after rot-eye herself, do we?"

That was very valid and my heart did ache for answers. I stared at my paws and inspiration flashed. I was a purple dragon; supposedly I could master every possible natural element there was, right? I shut my eyes to think of Cynder, her natural element wreathing her in the dark that came from safety and rest. Untainted shadow.

I'd taken long ago to assigning a sensation to my elements and imagining it dancing over my scales for close range elemental use. Fire was warm and soft, electricity hot and harsh, ice cool and dry.

What would shadow be? The flutter in my chest that seemed to come with Cynder came to mind, a fierce yet soft warmth that always seemed to be dancing. I tried to push that feeling to dance around my paw, where it traced my scales with light feathers drenched in warmth.

I heard Sparx actually gasp on my nose and forced my eyes open. There was a light swirl of shadow around my paws. It may not shine like fire, but even still it seemed warmer than anything. Calm and dark and pleasant as good dreams. Clearly Sparx could see the beauty in it, too. The fact that elements usually used for war could create something like this stabbed at my heart.

"Now, let's see if I can do this," I muttered regretfully, and tried to draw out the warmth from the shadows, pulling it back to my

scales. I thought of what I'd once been, of my old paws. Bringing up those regrets seemed to chase the warmth away as I worked to layer the harsh shadows all over me. Working with a new element with this much dexterity so soon was hard, so I tried to layer the warmth from the start under it, which did help some. "Sparx, do I look like when we go dark?"

He fluttered up to sit on one of the statue's horns to study me critically. "You've got the shadows down-pat, but you need to make your eyes glow, and for crying out loud, be scary for once to pull it off right."

"Let's start with the glowing eyes, then," I muttered. I'd never been good at using multiple elements at once, but luckily having them on without them being strong enough to cause harm was so much easier. Even with the harshness of the shadows, it was almost refreshing. I certainly couldn't hold it while launching an attack, but maybe I could affect my eyes if my crazy idea worked.

I worked to spark the smallest layer of electricity possible across my eyes, small enough that I could barely feel an odd pleasant tingle. I bared my sharpened teeth in my best snarl I could and turned theâ€"hopefullyâ€"intimidating expression on Sparx.

He promptly burst out in fits of hysterical laughter. As it went on and on, I let my new costume fade to glower when he started to clutch his stomach.

"Was it the eyes?" I asked, a bit put down.

"No," he said through his hands, trying to suppress his guffaws. "No, you had it right, that's why it's so funny."

I raised an eyebrow dryly, which he shook his head helplessly at.

"Buddy." He paused. "Can I call you buddy?"

I didn't grace that with a response.

"You looked like you'd gone dark, but you also looked like you were prepping to have a tooth pulled. Do it again."

I forced myself back into the uncomfortable expression as Sparx fluttered up to my face. "First of all, don't clench your mouth so much, you look like you're in serious pain." He put his whole body weight into shoving my left eye-ridge down before similarly attacking the right. "Second, your eyes are just as important. You gotta keep your eyebrows low and fierce 'less your mocking someone."

He backed up to study his handiwork before demanding I shut my mouth. I blinked in no small amount of confusion, trying to key my eye ridges like he said as he flashed to either side of my mouth to drag my lip up over my teeth. Next, he flew to the bridge of my nose and tapped either side, telling me to "do whatever dragons do to make that part wrinkly." I tensed up my face into a snarl, focusing on the muscles rather than raising my lips over a clenched jaw.

Sparx fluttered in front of me, sniggering at my obvious discomfort. Drawing his voice up into a bad attempt at an obnoxious stereotypical

teenage female twang, he said, "You look fabulous, sugar. Now we just gotta work on those eyes of yours. Put your makeup back on, honey."

It was my turn to laugh, and admittedly, it was a laugh I had desperately needed.

57. A MILLION WAYS TO DIE IN THE WELL

Myst

I woke with a shiver. My body felt strange and distant around me, like reaching for a long lost friend. I heard a light, high voice sigh in relief beside me and turned my head blearily as my eyesight flickered. "Viri?"

"You're up!" was the ecstatic reply. "I was real worried, Myst. You passed out and then you weren't moving at all and barely breathing."

"Yes, young dragoness." I looked up as the towering form of Ignitus stooped to look at me. "What happened? It certainly seemed like a vision, but usually there would have been signs of you reacting to what you saw in the form of flicking eyes or restlessness. You seemed vacant, and that concerns me."

I reached a shaky paw to put it against his muzzle to make sure it was real. I felt vacant and far away. "I saw Cynder. She's where the Chronicler is, and I saw what happened to her the last few days. It's badâ€!"

Worry flashed in his eyes as he sat, pulling me so I could lean against his other forepaw. "Viriti, please give us a moment to discuss this alone."

I heard her whine like a puppy before complying, tail and ears drooped as she trailed out of the room. The hurried thanks I called after her caused her tail to twitch and ears to perk straight up as she flashed a weak grin back at me. "Sorry for biting you."

"Hey, it helped," I said weakly, having hoped to pretend it didn't happen, but clearly that wasn't what she needed. "We can talk about it later, but if you're doing it to help someone I don't see any problem. But you wanna ask them first if you can, anyway."

Her tail gave a few happy wags at that. "Thanks, Myst!" she yelped before literally hopping out of the room as I blinked tiredly.

"I wish I had half her energy right now," I muttered ruefully to Ignitus.

He sighed heavily. "I would graciously settle for a tenth. Please, tell me what you know."

* * *

><p>Cynder

It hurt when Myst vanished. I didn't even have the chance to say

goodbye. The mist that seemed to make her up in this form began to fade, flicker, and vanished into nothing. As we had stood there crying, the harshness of the spirits around us seemed to have faded a bitâ€"like waking up from a nightmare. Everything wasn't so black or white anymore, tones of sepia permeating the world.

"Perhaps then," the fire spirit rumbled, pacing before me, each footstep leaving simmering coal in his wake, "you can remember now that you still have something to fight for? And that this is not the way to do it?"

I turned my back, fighting the incorporeal weight that pulled my tail and wings to the ground. I'd never been so tired in my life.

"Yeah." My voice was ruefull and defeated. "I guess I can. I don't suppose you'd be so kind to just let me blast this damned rock?"

"Unfortunately not," the thunderous voice hissed through the heavy air. "Whatever our opinion on events, the Chronicler holds domain over the living. Clearly you need more guidance now, from us, but you are still outside of our laws and our wishes."

With a hiss of rushing air, the other spirits were gone, and the lightning spirit's long neck gestured to the one door I hadn't hijacked. I didn't have the energy to disagree.

I stepped through the yellow-gilded doors, the one remaining spirit pacing behind me.

"Lightning is often diverted from its path, yet it continues."

I was goddamn sick of getting lectured. My chest felt sullen, heavy and dead, and clawed open by each breath. The shadows were gone, but I could still feel them dancing eerily under my scales. I'd never felt more alone in my life.

"Yeah," I muttered bitterly. "I get it. Keep fighting, and ancestorsâ€"literallyâ€"forbid I fight the fool who caused my brother to die and my best friend's capture, while I steadily break a promise to the closest thing to a sister I have."

"The Chronicler was perhaps not the ancestor's strongest of choices. We wanted someone who could be cool and cold, to prevent another Maleforâ€"another Dark Master, to you, young dragon. We went too far in our bid to do so, and what we created by separating a being from others for too long is well apparent now."

The earth spirit's light voice continued, though the construct had vanished. "With only destiny to worry about and guide him, the dragon who was once our friend became obsessed. Time means little to the dead, and everything to the living. And despite everything, the Chronicler is still alive, growing older and grayer without death to sate his exhaustion. Kaboa was our hope to temper our mistake."

The ice spirit's lofty voice continued. "And it failed. Then, when Ignitus took your egg, destiny all but crumbled. The Chronicler's one and only constant. It drove him mad out of fear, fear that the world would be destroyed because he somehow failed to nudge it correctly. Any bonds he held to the living began to sever just when Kaboa joined

him. And for all our hopes, she could not bear to look at him and think of the lives he could have saved. She grew to hate her master as he fought and fought for destiny's sake, trying to send you on the path another was meant for. Evidently, that failed. But you should not blame Kaboa for his sins. She is here to wait for someone with loyalty and love that could rival your own."

I was walking through some sort of expanse of nothing that had no right to exist within the laws of physics. Eerily silent bolts of electricity danced in spirals around the black, floorless expanse. I liked it; it encompassed my thought process perfectly. Empty, stale, and confused.

"I'll talk to her myself," I muttered quietly, tacking on a "thanks" at the end halfheartedly. I missed Sparx. He'd be aghast at how much awkward could fill aâ€¢whatever the hell this place was.

"Regardless. For now, you will go through his trial and I will lend you your power back," the electricity creature murmured. "And then you will show me what you have learned."

With only the heavy silence that follows a thunderstorm, it was gone.

* * *

><p>Spyro

I stood looking into the crater, perched on the edge of the Well of Soul's summit. A spear of purple light shot into the sky and pierced through the heart of the circular platform, sending a glimmer of sick purple over the stoneâ€¢a pillar of convexity.

This was foolish, and I well knew it. If Cynder wasn't coming here, there'd be no point. Only a dragon born in the Year of the Dragon could free Malefor, and there was only us. It would be better if we hid and waitedâ€¢waited where we couldn't cause any harm.

But if there was one thing I knew about Cyn, she would not back down, she would not leave me here, and she would not run. And if she ended up at the Well, she'd need all the help she could get.

And whenever I thought of leaving, of abandoning the unknown cat, it felt like something was beating, biting and clawing to get out of my chest. My very bones revolted and stuck fast. It scared me and I couldn't help but wonder why. Somehow it was stronger than the worry for Cynder, and I'd thought she was the most important thing I had left when my real life was a question of months I could remember since she'd turned me back.

With a sigh, I hit my paw on the crater's edge, forming a small cranny with my earth element. "Get in. I've got to fly down there, so you can't just stick under my wing. I made a little peep hole, so you can watch, and you can get out how you came in. If you have to go later, watch out for dreadwings. They'd be happy to snap you up. Don't forget that any ape could get you easily, too. Cynder needs you; be careful."

"I know they could swat me like a fly, purple-boy," Sparx replied

tiredly, uncharacteristically serious. "I've known that all along. I also know that I've got about the chance of said fly in hell to get back to the temple on my own without getting eaten, smashed or swatted. So don't you _dare _die on me."

I chuckled dryly, a humourless laugh that felt dead in my gut. "I certainly don't endeavour to. I think it's best if you stay hidden, even when Cyn gets here." If she gets hereâ€œ "She probably doesn't know this place, or the effect it could have on her. She'll probably be fighting going dark, and seeing you in danger would only make it harder."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'll play hide and seek. But you better be going before they finally think to look up or some dreadbats pop in or something. Go, I'll be fine. I've lived this long; I can take a few days on my own. I've got the food you caught me, just get going."

I didn't want to leave him there, especially since I half expected this fool's errand to end badly with my death, imprisonment, or corruption. And then what? I'd be as good as served on a silver platter if or when The General's Master returned, if I did live.

Unless Cynder came. And worry as I would, she did have my faith in this.

"I'm a fool," I muttered ruefully to myself before I snapped my wings out and took that ill-begotten dive.

58. GAME OF THRONES

Spyro

"Been a long time, Gaul."

Even the General had hated this beast. Unlike the other apes, he bore no corrupting enchantment. He was perfectly willing to serve the Dark Master as his race became tatters of the prideful warriors they'd been once.

"Ah, The General." The ape sat on his towering throne, his surviving eye studying me as a viper might a cornered mouse. "I see you've deigned to show yourself. I apologize for the grievous accommodations we had for you; they were certainly unbefitting of one equal to my rank."

"I grow weary of your word games, Gaul," I growled, injecting as much arrogance into my voice as I could, trying to remember the disdain the General had for him. "Paw over that panther or I will be leaving. You've nothing else to hold me here, and your dreadwings will easily fall to my lightning should I choose to fly away. You will not take me off guard with dark gems again. If you can't see from the remains of my cell, they have little effect. After all, I've got my own."

It was a bluff I could only pray he'd take. He didn't know about Sparx, and without his help there was no hope of escape. If I was right, they could only think they errored in their judgment that the dark gems would hold me. They had no reason to doubt any personality

I decided to show them, as any ape that met us died, and the assassin did not answer to Gaul.

"Oh?" Gaul began to reach for his staff, but I beat him to it with a lance of earth breath that coated the crystal atop it. It'd likely take them days to chip it off. Eyeing my precision with some small trace of admiration, he lay it back down. "Very well. Clearly you are not as spineless as we'd presumed. What exactly is it you want?"

I let the harsh shadows trace faintly at my paws, feigning ignorance to them. I let one lip curl into what Sparx insisted was a sneer. The only thing keeping the mask in place was my stark desperation that this would work. "I want many things. My throne as one of your rank. For the world to stop treating me like I am still a child. I want my real power back, something only Master can grant. My time with those fools was a frustration, and they would not allow me to leave if I tried. And finally, I want that cat. She interests me, and I know how bad you are at keeping your prisoners alive and kicking."

That brought what was clearly a calculated laugh out of him.
"Interests you, does she, dragon? Nothing more?"

"Indeed. She seemed desperate to protect me, yet I cannot fathom why. I wish to find out for myself, as I don't trust anything you've got to tell me." I could only pray he couldn't see the desperate lies in my eyes; I could certainly see the amused delight behind his stoic mask.

"That prisoner is ours by order of our Master. Perhaps if you destroy the black whelping that defeated you, he might be willing to gift her to you? I think he would be pleased by how you have changed, and would not endeavour to stifle your intelligence and personality a second time."

He actually bought it? I suppressed the urge to jump into the air with a mad whoop. Dragon expressions really must be alien to him. He'd dropped the air of superiority, which meant he didn't want to offend or annoy me too much if I did gain power and rank enough to be trouble for him. I was probably a worry to him, too; a much craftier General would likely quickly outrank him. I could only imagine he was hoping to pull it so it seemed my change of side went to his credit.

"She will come after me," I said. "It is best I remain here. But I will remain by your side, where I will know if you plan to double cross me. And you will bring the cat here as well, where I can see her and make sure your fools are keeping her properly breathing. Finally, my name is Spyro. You will not mock me with the rank I lost."

That displeased Gaul. He couldn't go against me in case it hurt him later, but he couldn't leave me easily free to fly away. Apparently, he bought my acting pretty well because he stayed his opinion on the second grievance. "Come here, you fools!"

A gaggle of apes scrambled in at his demand, cowering at the obvious irritation laced under his voice.

Gaul's deep tenor continued. "Bring our guest what he needs to be comfortable here, and live prey so he can see for himself it isn't

toxic. See if you can't construct a throne for him as well. He's leading the black whelp right to us. You are to treat him with the respect I demand. I want our panther chained, blindfolded, and gagged. Plug her ears, as well. You are to bring her here and leave her where we can see her."

I swear I could feel Sparx inwardly cheering from his hole.

Clearly Gaul wasn't going to risk the unknown pantheress reacting or telling me my answers early. Gaul was no fool and I was lucky to have outmaneuvered him once already. I wasn't prepared to push him further.

"I expect spirit crystals, as well," I demanded. "Normal ones, Gaul. I am displeased you sent your troops against me so that I had to bow to my enemies to survive. I've no reason to trust you yet, and I will be prepared for you to betray me as you already have. I've been wounded numerous times and you've pulled me away from discovering what Cynder was looking for. That was vital information we now lack, thanks to your mistrust."

59. THE LEAST THIS WORLD COULD DO

Cynder

The supposed challenge passed by in a blur. I had little interest in anything but breaking the rules of it as much as I possibly could. I'd swim through the water. Only electricity seemed to damage anything, but it did not stop me from ditching my enemies in water to short themselves out, or shoving these odd scuttling switches into earth-element homemade crevices. Or worse. So much worse.

It wasn't as comforting as it had been before the shadows had left. The worst part was that I still felt just as achingly empty. And now, with the numbing anger gone, my limbs felt hollow and heavy. It had been so much easier, that brief time where it felt like violence could solve all the problems in the world.

But it couldn't, and even if my faith was crumbling under my paws, I'd keep fighting, because that was all there was left of me. At the very least, I owed it Spyro. Owed it to Myst, to Ignitus and the other Guardians.

I stepped onto the yellow warpstone tiredly, heart sunken to my paws. As the world blurred to sepia around me, it became a round platform where the spirit was waiting. She was tall and towering, lightning dancing across her as I only looked on with deadened eyes.

"I hope you don't want to fight," I said ruefully. "There's no point. I've got more important things to worry about than fighting allies."

I swear, if the stones that served as her eyes could have blinked, they would have. "Yes, little dragon. That's it exactly. Needless violence serves nobody's purpose, nor does needless anger. You must channel it to the sources that truly deserve it. The pain you wish to cause will serve no purpose but to make him yet more distant and yet more of a danger to the world."

"Yeah," I murmured ruefully. "He's not worth it. Wasting time on him only belittles the people who do matter. I won't let Sparx's sacrifice be disgraced like that. No fool's worth that much."

Saying it like that made it horribly, terribly real.

Sparx was dead. He'd been crushed, or trapped, or burned. He would have followed me. He'd never abandon me of his free will. And it was my fault for forgetting him. Drunk off the Angel's Folly and distracted by Travix as I was, it was still my fault. He would never forget me like that.

I stepped onto the rising platform tiredly, gazing over at the fading spirit. "With all the things I've seen since I left home, all the wonders and the hope and the power and the magic, you'd think the least this damned world could give me was a way to protect the people that mattered. This world isn't worth a thing without them."

"I know." The answer was exhausted. Even this spirit of such power and age couldn't fight that fact. "But this world brought them here to begin with, and that is a gift none can deny."

* * *

><p>Myst

"There's only a few days left."

I looked up at Kuro, eyes wide. "Really?"

I'd forgotten with recent events, and so I raced to the window, propping my paws on the sill to peer at the sky. The moons were all but caressing each other, their lights mixing and melding betwixt them.

He paced beside me, his eyes focused on the moons with a deep hope as his tailtip twitched restlessly. "We must leave in two days' time. The Guardians will be searching for Cynder and Spyro, and likely taking shelter elsewhere before that night. The dark forces have gathered to spend the night somewhere else. It should be an uneventful flight, and slipping off should be easy."

"It's a bad idea." I swung around around to see Viriti timidly pacing into the room. "I heard you before. Listen, Myst, please. I won't try and stop you. Not ever. But the dead and the living aren't meant to meld. I can feel ice in my bones the closer those moons get."

Irritation turned into anger in my chest, something wild and fierce. I didn't turn back to the moons, but my voice was low and scratchy as pressure built behind my eyes. "You think they're mad at me?"

"No, never!" she squeaked, and when I whipped around, her ears were plastered against her head. "But the dead are differentâ€| Look what kind of affect the coming night's having on the two of you and think. It does that to dragons, momma says. If you're like this to me, what's it do to the dead? This is no fairy tale with a happy ending; you won't get the answers you want like this."

"Then we will make it work," Kuro rumbled, and I couldn't help but

agree. "I will keep her safe. You don't need to fear for her."

I wasn't done yet; the pressure of what felt like a betrayal was tearing my beaten heart apart. "I don't care if they're dead, my village would never hurt me." My voice was stony and cold. "Not my parents, either. They might not agree, but there isn't a soul in this world they'd harm. If this Dark Master stood before them with his chest bare, they would let him live."

I swung back to stare out the window before my fire-branded eyes began to leak.

"I hope you're right," Viriti whimpered behind us. I heard a scuffle of paws and then nothing.

This would work.

It had to.

60. CYNDER TO CINDERS

Cynder

"Expose your heart to summon ghost.

"Then face alone what you fear most,

Find peace with demons at the hearth,

Bury those fears beneath the earth.

But keep in mind there's no danger here

Face to face with that which you fearâ€|"

There was a firm strain of anger in her voice when it flooded the air, like there was a roiling storm beneath it. It clearly wasn't directed at me, but it felt like it should shake my bones all the same.

Hearing Kaboa's voice here again was like a stab to the chest. But a bit of hope seemed to settle within me as well. Was she really here? Would I see her? What did it mean? Because, ancestors knew, I didn't want to be alone anymore. The warp pad before me glowed with all the strength of hellfire and seemed to resonate with a chill that drove into my scales and grasped with icy claws at my bones.

I eyed the stone locks with their glowing runes around the portal, briefly wishing I could just blast through them like I had the others. But they seemed stronger and, without the darkness, my powers were at their normal level again. If this thing involved a fight, I didn't want to waste my powers on a fool's errand.

Stepping on the gleaming circle sent my stomach hurling through the floor. The light flooded my senses in a blinding barrage of white. I swear I could taste it. It felt like being torn apart for a moment, and then black flooded the world.

Then more flashes of light surrounded me in blasting flares. Torched,

broken mushroom trees surrounded me, still smoldering. A sick heave of recognition sent a painful quiver through my heart. When had I got home? What had happened? Wasn't I somewhere else seconds ago? Panic set my limbs quivering when I realized I couldn't remember where that had been.

"Cynder? Baby?" The voice was trembling and tired. "Holy stars, it is you."

I turned, heart wilting at the exhaustion in that voice.
"Mom?"

And there she was, on the forest floor—a place no dragonfly should ever be. One long wing was wilted and ripped, bits of the end torn beyond the point of healing.

Without legs, if a dragonfly ripped a wing, there was nothing left for them but death. They used their wings as much as their voices to do the magic that could send the predatory insects away or force bulb spiders to protect them from frogweed or weed giants. Dragonfly huts were burning everywhere, and all I could hope was that they'd left or that they just didn't want to see me; they never had.

But not Dad. He would never leave me alone, and he'd never leave her like this. Ancestors, had the war reached here too? I should have stopped it before it ever could!

I stepped forward, a great fear and guilt sweeping my heart away. This was my fault. All mine. I was meant to protect everything; why hadn't I asked Ignitus to look after them? Visited?

"I'm happy I can see you again, at least! Come, let me see you, sweetheart, you've grown fierce. You're even more beautiful than the day you left..." I lowered my head to feel her faltering hand touch it. She was barely glowing anymore. "We've heard. Oh, Cyn, you did so much good! Our!"

Her glow faltered again as she was forced to let her hand fall. For the first time, I realized with horror that a white, glowing ichor was surrounding her—dragonfly's blood. I wanted to scream at her, scream at the skies that it wasn't enough. I'd let my brother, her son, die. I'd let this place be ravaged. I'd let Spyro be captured. I angrily shoved the shadows trying to reach into my mind away; they'd made me waste time.

"Our boys would have been so proud of you, Cyn!"

Her glow went out.

The world went white.

If the temple had been bad before, it was hell frozen over now. The eloquently crafted stone lay in shatters. I could only see Ignitus of the Guardians, crouching in front of Myst and three small mammalian figures—one of the bigger manweersmall clutching a wrapped bundle in her paws.

Ancestors, how did they get here? Mole-Yair was supposed to be keeping them safe. I prepared to run forward, but my feet stuck like they were coated with lead. I tried to scream to him, ask what was

wrong and where the other Guardians were, but the words stuck in my throat.

A great feral screech cracked through the air and a shadow whipped over me. I didn't have time to track its perpetrator before he crashed down in front of Ignitus.

Noâ€!

The General towered over my mentor, even more bestial than before. Ropes of saliva hung from his jaws and he was covered in scrapes that bled buckets he barely seemed to notice. A fierce predatory grin peeled his writhing lips up over filed teeth.

I fought to bring any element to my chest, but it felt like they'd abandoned me again. Even shadow, dammit, my true element wouldn't rise to my aid.

I knew how this would end.

"Where is Cynder?" Ignitus' voice rose in a rare snarl, but the General didn't seem to comprehend his words.

I wanted to cry to him that I was there, that I wanted to keep fighting. That it wasn't over yet.

The General lunged forward with the speed and grace of a wolf, and before I knew what was happening his fangs were buried in Ignitus' throat. When the General released his neck and he fell with a heart-shattering crash, Myst's terrified eyes met mine.

The General followed her gaze, a vicious snarl creeping over the face that was meant to belong to my friend. Everything was falling apartâ€!

He paced towards me, each step like a crack of thunder. A deep growl rumbled through the air and I could see betrayal in those wide, monstrous eyes. I let him be captured and done nothing as he was caught. Those eyes were right.

This was all on me. Even still, I vainly fought to reach my elements. But I couldn't feel them in my chestâ€"only the bare, empty echo of a breaking heart.

— "Leave her alone!" — Seeing him like that had almost made me forget Myst's presence. She launched towards us, wind whipping my face and swatting at my scales. A light glow swamped her scales as her fangs gritted. I could only stare in horror as she leapt at the General's back, a fury beginning to form around her that would kill them both.

The light exploded into a great tempest. Both her and the General let out feral, pained screams.

The world went white.

I was huge, and I could hear him in my head and heartâ€"that edge of malevolence that had tainted the General's voice when possessed. Shadows washed around my scales and I could feel something hard digging into my neck.

Gone, gone, goneâ€| They were all gone. I tried to turn my head to see what was hurting me, but I couldn'tâ€"couldn't move my paws or tail or wings.

I could only look forward as a sea of apes surrounded Terrador. Cyril and Volteer were close by, apes swarming over their bodies with high, howling laughter.

Terrador's eyes were dead already when he saw his friends fallen. I realized with a thrill of fear that I must have done this. My memory was scant and jumpy, but with the General gone, the Dark Master must have wanted me instead.

_"__Finish him." My voice was venom.

The apes descended on Terrador.

The world went white.

My real body was back. I stood high on a cliff, staring out at a broken, burned, lifeless world that wasn't worth anything anymore. Somewhere in what was left of my heart, I knew this desolate place wasn't the last of its kindâ€"that everywhere was just as desperately lonely and dead.

"I did thisâ€| My voice was a whisper in the great expanses of lonely space.

"It was to be expected." I reeled to face the towering, sad figure of Kaboa. "You were never meant for this task. The Chronicler was correct. You can not do what your destiny denied you."

I couldn't argue when looking at what was before me, but even still, I shoved the shadows away. "There's nothing leftâ€|"

"No, there isn't," Kaboa agreed dully. "The magic is dying, even us ancestors are vanishing; there's no one left but you to hold us from finally sleeping. It's better than being stuck here any longer."

"You're right," I muttered, my voice small and exhausted. There wasn't anything left for me here. Without any prey left, I'd only starve anyway.

I shoved the shadows away with as much spirit as I could muster, driving them into the recesses of my guilt-riddled mind. If I was going to die, I would do it on my own terms and in my right mind. I couldn't hold the darkness gnawing at this guilt for long.

I ran forward, towards the edge of the cliff. The dead, dry wind tore at my scales, trying to stop me. I wouldn't let it. I lept into its embrace, forcing my wings to remain gripped to my sides.

The barren earth was so far away, stark and dead and aggressive.

For the first time in my life, a fear for the sheer height struck at my chest; my instincts fought to tear my wings open.

I ignored them.

It felt like something warm clamped to my shoulders, but it must have been my imagination.

I shut my eyes tight, ready.

The world went black.

61. READY FOR WAR

Kaboa

"Now do you get it?" A growl rumbled in my chest as the Chronicler stared in horror at the hourglass' reflective surface.

I believed he finally did, but I couldn't stop the growl or the jabs.

"Now do you see? What Ignitus did might have been stupid and selfish, and maybe that's why that damned law started, but our idiocy isn't her fault. Your planned destiny died with that choice; it's true. The Spyro that would have come here would not have had her doubts or her fears. Or hell, even an imagination like that." I jerked my head to the side as, in the faint reflection, a towering, shadowed Cynder ordered Terrador's death.

"The fact remains that they are different dragons. They won't and can't travel the exact same path. And she's still a child; one who has gone through hell. You ought to treat her like one, regardless of what I've done to you or what my mate has done to your destiny."

"Ancestors." His eyes were fixed forwards, and I jerked my head around to see the flimsy Ghost of Cynder racing towards the edge of a cliff, her eyes smouldering and dark.

The curses rolling off my tongue made the Chronicler flinch. He reached forward and a thin blue mist left his mouth, hanging eerily around the hourglass. Time in the illusion seemed to freeze, and it took real effort to see that she was still inching forward within the time misalignment.

"We've got to hurry," I snapped. "That won't last forever. What do we do? I need to get in there. She could snap the tether to her body trying to take her own life in there."

"I don't understand," he admitted tiredly, shaking his head.

Why?

"Because you've left her nothing to fight for," I snarled, "in a world with nothing left _to_ fight. Unlike what would have happened, she doesn't think she actually _can_ save the world. She's not the legendary purple and she well knows it. She's had plenty of time to worry about what will happen because she's not good enough. How do I get in there?"

He raised his paw and another soul-portal rose with a rumble from the ground. "I cannot do it. My mind will not detach anymore. I cannot reach her. But be aware, the only way to reach her dream realm is to

travel through your own. Are you prepared to live your own worst fear?"

I sighed, placing my first forepaw on the glowing panel as my heart sank.

"You poor, silly old fool," I murmured. "You really don't understand people at all anymore, do you? I already have lived through my worst fear. I can do it again."

* * *

><p>Myst

"I have a gift for you, Myst. I managed to make contact with a friend before visiting Tanarus and Marina," Kuro said. "It should help if anything goes south."

I trailed after him stiffly. "They're family, Kuro. It won't."

"I know," was the tired reply. "But even still. If I'm going to be taking you anywhere dangerous, you should be prepared. I won't risk something happening to you."

"Same to you.." I muttered tiredly. Nervous dreams had kept me up for nights on end.

He paced into one of the scarcely used rooms, which was half flooded in a still cascade of rubble. One look at it had tagged the place as more effort than it was worth to fix. Kuro dug into a pile of old rotted pillows and blankets, far too tattered to be of good use to anyone, forming a nest around what was hidden inside.

A gasp slid past my lips as I approached, laying a paw on the smooth helmet. It'd been especially made for me; all of it.

"How did you get this made?" I could only squeak, stunned. I didn't know much about weapons or wartime, but even my parents believed in armor, if not for using it to fight back.

He shrugged his huge wings, a tired smile pulling up his lips. "You make a fair few friends in my line of work, little Myssy. And with my friends, they don't think less of me for being a snooty dragon and all. Relations with a few races are still strong, though. This here was made by manweersmalls and moles working together. It'll keep growing with you for maybe eight or so years before it gets too thin and brittle to use in battle. When those two races pair up for these kinds of projects and mix their magicks, the nickknacks produced can be really impressive."

The set was white with blue accents and there was a faint white glow to it not unlike what was produced from spirit gems.

"It's beautiful, Kuro," I murmured, taking up the helmet as a mother might her egg. It was easy enough to put on, slipping over my two huge horns and onto my head. The cool metal felt smooth and strangely warm on my scales.

He chuckled. "The helmet's easiest to get on. Let me show you how to do the rest."

It was surprisingly easy to learn. The main body of the armor was mostly an odd sort of chainmail, almost as fine as fabric. Plates ran along my stomach and back, guarding the softest parts of my body, the places where belly-plating merged with scale, and around my back-blades. The helmet splayed in a feather-like shape around my chin, the bits pointing away from me razor sharp to discourage any blow aimed at my throat. A spiked circlet went around my tail-tip, preventing it from being grabbed, as far as I could tell.

One of the only worthwhile parts of this decimated room was that the only intact mirror in the temple stretched over one wall. I remembered Cyn's look of incredulous amazement when she saw a clear reflection for the first time, and she'd developed the habit of coming to clean it from dust and grime—a ritual I'd followed suit with after she left.

I turned. The white and blue armor seemed snug as a second skin, the faceted chainmail glimmering in the spotty light filtering in from the window.

It looked so, so strange on me—like I was ready for war.

Was I?

I had to be.

62. WAR MAKES MONSTERS

"When our dreams all fail and the ones we hail are the worst of all,
and the blood runs stale!"

I want to hid the truth; I want to shelter you!

But with the beast inside, there's nowhere we can
hide!"

— "Demons" Imagine Dragons

* * *

><p>Kaboa

The world went white.

The pressure was the first thing I noticed as the world faded into existence around me—a strange force that lanced painfully down my spine. I knew now, though I hadn't back then, that I was sensing the corruption that clung to the Dark Army. I'd unknowingly sensed it before in my childhood, fighting through the arena. The Scavengers had been quick to capture any monster they could get their paws on before Scabb's accident and the birds' takeover.

I struggled to hold onto my memories as the portal's magic fought to tear them from me. I could not forget who I was or how I'd changed, or that these events had happened more than a decade ago. If I did, I'd have no strength left in me to fight; no way to help Cynder. It would destroy me.

I fought with tooth and claw as the illusion tried to rip away the knowledge of what was really happening. My paws grew stiff, a sensation that climbed to embrace my legs and belly until I couldn't move anymore.

It was my burden to bear for fearing helplessness, just as it had been Cynder's. I closed my eyes before the achingly familiar visage could fall upon me. All the scars of life that did not marr my spiritual form returned to me. The silvery platinum jewelry that my mate had gifted to me was once again snug around my neck, ankles and tail.

I felt his breath on my shoulder and his wing stretched over my back. I shivered. My voice wasn't my own and I couldn't break from the memory.

"Something's coming," I murmured, miserably burying my head under his chin. "Something feels wrong."

"Easy, Coaly, I'm terrified too." His voice was full of concern. His tail wrapped around mine and it set off a comforting fire in my chest. "But I haven't seen anything. I've been spending hours looking in the pool. And you are many things, Kabs, but you're not a seer. If we call in reinforcements without proof, we'll only shatter their trust."

My body reluctantly opened its eyes and seeing him there was both the most wonderful and the most heart-rending experience of my life. The dusklight through our window sent a soft gleam over his orange scales, making them glow and shimmer like the fire he could birth. His dull golden horns shone like a metal more precious than anything that could ever be mined and his coppery eyes had a depth to them, like the fire that formed his element flickered behind them.

My heart broke when the memory turned my head away to stare out the window. "Something still doesn't feel right. Think I can get out to look? For my own peace of mind, if nothing else. The generals Gaul, Jaxar and Orosen are still out in the air."

"If you have to for your own peace of mind, I don't think the others' opinions can overrule that." He turned his face guiltily to the wall. "After all, we have more reason to sense oncoming dread."

I knew how my eyes would have softened as I leaned forward to touch my forehead to his. Ancestors, how I missed such simple contact. How I missed him. "Look after her for me. I'll be back soon."

That brought out his old chuckle. "And you still insist that it will be a she, hmm?"

My body smirked. "Oh, of course. It's mother's intuition."

I turned towards the large window, our huge mirror showing me the scar that used to run across my forehead. It was the largest mirror in the temple. "Besides, any child of yours would have the good sense to be born female. You're the exception; we both know males usually age idiotic."

He gave a light, rumbling laugh. "And yet any child of yours will be full to brim with surprises. We can only wait and see what befalls

us. But yes, he or she will still be here when you get back."

I chuckled tiredly. "I've still got a mother's worry, you know."

And my body launched itself into a leap through the window, wings packed tight to my sides so I could slip through.

What followed was a painful waiting game as my body searched, staying low to the ground or within my shadow, looking for signs in the surrounding area that something could be amiss. But I already knew that something was dreadfully wrong and I'd managed to pass it right by.

The howling caught my attention. I'd gotten as far as the Silver River and the sound jolted my spine. My head whipped around, trying to pinpoint the ape's war cry, until I realized just where it came from. Even years away from when it had happened, my heart dropped to my paws. As my body flashed into the ground, racing at incredible speeds, my stomach was left behind.

No matter how many years had past, the lurch of horror that went straight through me at the mere thought of this moment was always the same. Seeing it again beyond my usual nightmares was something I could never be prepared for.

The spacious room was filled with broken stone and busted shell floating in a mess of flesh, blood and bone, littering the floor in great puddles of gore. The apes turned to stare with no small vestiges of fear as shadow coated my body.

A deep rage bubbled in my chest and it took all my strength to pull away, to remember it wasn't real, that it wasn't happening all over again.

"Well, if it isn't the black bitch come to greet us."

My body spun with a rumbling snarl as my shadow formed into spines, all sharp edges and lethal points. Great blades formed on each of my foreclaws as spikes ringed my throat and sidesâ€"guarding well the most vulnerable parts of me. I ran forward and slammed my paws into Gaul's chest, the tips of my shadows phasing through his war armor to dig into his flesh.

He'd grown still more hulking since our last encounter, bulking up to a height where he was taller than my shoulders. I'd underestimated his strength; he barreled it straight back at me and forced me back. One arm ripped back behind him and I had ducked in preparation for one of his gargantuan falchions to come sailing over my head.

I hadn't been prepared for his unfamiliar staff, its tip embedded with a magic gem and ringed by three long spines. I'd barely managed to dodge, eyeing the spirit gem. What the hell was he doing with one of our holy gems? That anger fueled my mad rage further as a roiling mass of darkness built in my chest. It hissed passed my fangs and into the world, coiling and snarling like a mass of vipers.

"You die now," my body rumbled, and I all but spoke with it.

I launched forwards, right through my razor shadows that would be death to anyone else. They roiled around me, forming around my limbs

until my shadow rose with them, a great beast of black vapor encasing me and moving to my every whim. But my shadows left the bodies on the floor unharmed, even stroking the unborn dead like a parent would, moving them into curled balls and preparing them to sleep forever. Spheres of shadow encased every sorry corpse, pulling them down, down, down into the earth and leaving them to rest in its bosom.

That, at least, I'd given them. That they wouldn't be here for this. I'd intended to wash the stone with their murderer's blood as well at the time. I'd shoved all my anguish into a tight ball of fury and tried to forget my daughter was there, beneath the old stone too. I'd never know what she looked like; if she'd have the same fire in her eyes Ignitus had. I'd wanted so much to prove I was rightâ€"that she'd be a girl.

My body launched forwards, spikes of shadow reaching to strike at Gaul, trailing tendrils behind me that tore his apes into bloody tatters. One whip scraped his leg and left it bleeding, but another struck his staff and, with a watery gurgle, dissipated. Gaul stared at the scepter for a moment before a great feral grin spread across his face. He sprang forward, swirling it before him and dissipating my shade fury with each swipe.

I backed up, arching my tail over my head. My shadow copied this movement and its tail burst into deadly ribbons.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.

Each struck the floor and gouged into solid stone as Gaul danced between them. Gritting his teeth, he leveled his staff at me, pulling one of his gargantuan swords off his back with his other hand. A great crackling green beam shot from the gem's heart, striking my chest like a hammerblow. I stumbled backwards as my shadowy mirage faltered around me and I fought to hold onto it. It took too long. He leapt forward and struck my chest with its tip.

With a sickening lurch, my element evaporated away. Nausea churned my stomach and it was hard to think straight enough to dodge his sword strike. I couldn't best him without my magic. I bunched my back legs and leapt forwards, hoping for a quick kill. One forepaw struck around his eye and, with an eerie lurch of pleasure, I'd forced my claws forwards.

As he shrieked, his sword struck the sad wreckage of shell and yoke beneath us, sending up a great spray of gore. It struck me in face and I backed off, both from the stinging eyes and the horror of what had stung them. Yolk and blood dribbled down my face and, before I'd known what had happened, a great stabbing agony pierced through the cracks in my chest armor. In, in, in it pushed. I had barely registered the pain.

Now, I forced myself to let it flow away.

It came as a jolt of surprise when I forced myself to become my shadow. I hadn't done that when this had truly happened years agoâ€"I couldn't have; my powers had been sucked dry by Gaul's magic. But suddenly I was me as I was now, a spirit of great and terrible powerâ€"a watcher of fate and spinner of the same.

The world tainted blue around me and, before I knew it, I was atop the foul apparition, free of the memory's hold on my limbs. My jaws around his jugular, I prepared to bite. It wasn't really him, but the taste of the blood would be real enough, and at last I could watch the murderer of youth bleed to death. Or I could cut him in a million places, only a little, and keep his wounds open and make it so agonizingly long.

What am I doing?

I backed off, eyes wide. My forepaws trembled beneath me.

"No," I murmured. I'd been wrong; that horrible day hadn't been my only great fear. I could never become a monster just as terrible as those I'd fought and killed.

War makes monsters of us all.

"You won't make me a monster too." I turned and walked away, and the illusion splintered around me. I ignored the false Gaul's infuriated cry behind me.

The world went white.

I was on a great cliff drenched in the blue power of the Chronicler's dragon time. Far below, a black form blurred towards the unforgiving earth. I launched down, pulling her up to cradle against my chest as the illusion began to darken.

The world went blackâ€|

* * *

><p>(AN)**

Well if the last two Cyn/Kabs chapters weren't kickers, I don't know what is. 'Cept for maybe when I kill offâ€" *gets tackled by spoiler bunnies* Oh god, the plot bunnies are mutatingâ€|

I thought I should add a touch of clarification here. The past/present thing in Kabby's vision is intentional; it's meant to show her struggling to separate from the 'Night Terror,' as it were. As for that name change, I thought LOC is becoming more of a "person vs. self (or self's fears)" thing rather than my original intent of focusing on the tainted shadow of Malefor and what he's done to the heroes and the realm.

This will probably be the last Kaboa POV for awhile, so I hope you liked it. Yes, if anyone is wondering, there will be a LOC: DotD. Its working name right now is "The Legend of Cynder: Wounds of War."

Also, are you guys interested in exploring either Travix or Kaboa's childhoods on a deeper level? They both have very fleshed out backstories. If I only do one, who would you prefer? I'm also toying with at least one interquel focusing on the two of them before I publish LOC3. Feelings on that? It'd most likely be 3rd-person Travix POV and focus on him finding his way to the temple and just what his and Viri's relationship is likely to be. That may not happen, regardless, but I'd love to hear thoughts on it.

Thanks for reading everyone, I treasure every review I get and read them frequently. Ta!

P.S. In case anyone wonders, Kabby does NOT naturally know dragon time. That's just her spirit / Chronicler's assistant voodoo.

63. MOONDUST

Cynder

The force that had gripped me seconds before the fatal crash clutched tighter and I felt warm belly-plating against my back. The white faded to blue and the thing holding me twisted until we hit the ground, the huge body below me skidding across stone.

The memories flooded back in a blur—"how I'd got there, that the hope wasn't gone yet, that I'd just almost killed the only hope left"—"me"—in my own foolishness. The vision's lies tore at my mind with grappling ice-cold claws as I fought to shove them away. My savior and I separated, and she was shaking as much as I was as I spread my quivering legs, panting, staring at the stone below.

The crying started quickly, no matter how bad I tried to hold it back. I wasn't the only one. Heedless of her betrayal, I clung to one of her paws, forehead flat against her ankle as I sobbed my heart out. Her smooth nose brushed the small of my back, her own tears streaming down me in rivulets.

"Little one." Her warm breath splayed across the back of my neck. "Don't you ever"—sob—"scare me like that again."

I hiccuped weakly, falling tiredly upon my belly, head landing on my paws. Above me, Kaboa fell first to her haunches and then sunk to her belly as well, a huge hiccup not so different from mine belching from her long throat. That brought a weak, hiccuping, desperately crazy chuckle from my belly, and once more a louder twin matched it.

I looked at her bigger, mirroring eyes and my inhibitions shattered. At the same moment, we cracked up into raucous—"and frankly highly concerning, considering the situations at hand"—laughter. It was high, it was hysterical, and it made us both sound quite insane.

I loved it. It was the most fun, and perhaps the only fun, I'd had since being trapped on that fuck-damned ship. She was really like my larger reflection then, she and I. Her body and scales were similar, though she was a bit less unhealthily slim than me. This wasn't surprising, considering prey had been real hard to come by when I was younger, and the fish the village caught just weren't the same, no matter what Myst said about it. According to Iggy, it would show worse when I was more of a teenager and start to fade after that.

She had my eyes and even a weird form of the faint markings that adorned my forehead. Her blades lacked notches, but shared my blades' shape. She had spines at the top of her neck, even if they arched up and weren't merged like mine were. Her stomach plates merged similarly too, if more jaggedly. If she had been younger, she could have so easily been my sister.

But she wasn't, so then...

"If we aren't the oddest pair," Kaboa chuckled dryly, but caught my wide mystified stare and tilted her head, concerned.

"Why," I coughed awkwardly, tail-tip twitching, "do we look so much like each other?"

Kaboa seemed to freeze and flinch, like she'd caught a toe under a large rock. Her tail twitched, and when she next spoke there was a scratch in her voice. "I wondered if you'd notice, Cynder." She stood and turned, tail dragging upon rough stone. "But you were right in what you said before. It doesn't matter what I am. It was your true parents, dragonflies, who raised you, Ignitus and his fellows who taught you in the ways that matter, your brother who shaped you, and your friends that made you so strong."

Her elegant neck turned to stare straight up at the towering ceiling. I swear the place hadn't looked this big from the outside. My whole body felt cold and ghostly, and I had no clue what to say or do. The pain she carried was so terribly, obviously real.

"It's silly," she murmured. "This was what that tradition was supposed to stamp away. This desperate want for your own. It never ended for me, and then in the temple there was no choice. There was only one black egg, and your father wanted you just as bad. It wasn't like we could ever forget."

"Who?" My voice was small; it sounded half broken. Everyone seemed to be leaving. And then this came; how was I even meant to feel about it? I hoped the strangled question was clear enough.

"Your father?" She sounded agonizingly distant, though she was only a few feet away. Her wings were drooping to the floor and I was sure I hadn't imagined the faint, sad streak of jealousy in her voice.

I nodded, heart in my throat. I'd wondered as a hatching; wondered what they'd be like. I'd always known I was adopted. Would a true father laugh like Flash did? With the little wrinkles at each corner of the mouth? Dragons didn't seem to have those little wrinkles. Would my 'real' mom play with my horns, try and shine them just because? I'd pretended not to like that when I was very little.

"Cynder, your birth father is Ignitus." She sighed heavily and seemed to wilt even more. "The reason I am here, playing the fool's lapdog, is for him and for you. I cannot say more than that."

I finally meet my birth mother, someone I already like, and she's already dead? That had been a secret, selfish part of my little quest from the start. And now this. My 'dad' hadn't even wanted to tell me who I was, and it was his and my fault that Kaboaâ€"Motherâ€"had to put up with the uptight bastard?

I didn't know what to make of that. The last traces of hysterics fled my system as a great numbing flood swept my soul away and drowned it, not even bothering to fight. What did I even want anymore? Why was I here?

"What now?" I muttered, stepping up and leaning quietly up against a hind leg. The fiery rage was gone, but what it left behind was the ocean in midwinterâ€"cold, white and lonely.

"You could stay." It was a thick, selfish prayer. I couldn't fault her; I was anything but selfless. "You could stay here and I could teach you. You're not ready; I can help. Then we can go back and fight again... You shouldn't have ever had to..."

"If only," I muttered wearily. "But no. It might not be the path you would have chosen for me, nor one I would ever have chosen for myself, but there's still some hope left to chase, maybe not for me or Sparx, but stillâ€"I have to walk it, do what I know is right. I can't let Spyro suffer that again. I can't risk more death for mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, friends and family to endure."

I shrugged helplessly. "Kaboa, you're right. It can't make a difference now. Whether I sprung at random from the Silver River or if you're really where I came from, we've got more important things to worry about."

She looked at me and I was sure there was steel flashing in my eyes. I shoved the pain, the confusion and the fear all up, tight in a ball, and threw it away as best as I could, picturing it flinging off and away and sinking into the cold sea. Maybe it would take some time for it to chase me down again.

I could only hope.

* * *

><p>"I'm building this house, on the moon, like a lost astronaut,<p>

Looking at you, like a star, from the place the world forgot,
And there's nothing that I can do except bury my love for
you."

_~Jaymes Young "Moondust"~

64. GRASPING AT SMOKE

Myst

Since Shade had shown up, the Guardians had tasked him to take care of me. Tanarus and Marina had tried to convince them of his brilliant tacticians skill, but Cyril stayed wary of their advice and Ignitus thought him too young.

Cynder, they'd said, and Spyro, were allowed to war for good reason. They wanted to test him first. I could get that; they barely knew himâ€"I barely knew this new, battlescarred, rough around the edges Kuro, either. He'd taken back his old name, at least, letting Shade fade away. I never did know why he chose to go by it.

Ignitus had seemed lonelyâ€"or more soâ€"since Cynder had left. He spent long days staring into the pool of visions, looking lost. I

closed my eyes and remembered him talking to Terrador. They'd woken me up; I'd been sleeping in the gardens just to be outside for once, as they had become safer as more dragons had arrived, their magic leeching into that of the temple and steadyng its inherent magic.

Their footsteps had woken me as Terrador rumbled on. "I know it's not the same, Ignitus. We all miss Galeah and, believe me, we miss Kaboa, too. Not so much as you, but we too feel the emptiness and the desolation of her absence. And Cynder is not hard to recognize for what she is. She has the resilience and courage of her parents."

Ignitus sighed tiredly. "I believe she has more. I worry for her. Something is blocking her from the pool and tugging my heart away into it. Each time it's harder to turn back; it is so achingly familiar. But each time I return, I must look again, old friend. I must find Cynder. Myst's vision was worrying to no end and we no longer have an army to call upon here."

"Indeed," came the green Guardian's rumble. "Word has likely spread of our return, and of Cynder's appearance and Spyro's freedom. Heads will turn if we do not make for Warfang or another major warhead soon. As for your visions, have you thought of asking young Myst's aid?"

I shrunk beneath the tall springy grass, guilty at my eavesdropping, but too timid to reveal myself and lacking the heart to block my ears so I wouldn't hear what I shouldn't.

"Myst is eight," Ignitus said, a low growl of pain resonating in the air. "We do not need to rest our burdens on yet more children than we already have."

"Really?" Terrador's slow footfalls fell to rest. "Is she? I don't believe so. Not really. Her wisdom rivals many adults I've met, and certainly most adolescents. She has grown too fast, learned vocabulary too quickly, since she was brought here. If her capture was shortly after the General's massacre of her village, she has been in some odd state of stasis for ten years or more. To her account, and her physical appearance, she is eight—an age she never acts upon now. Her soul grew on without her body, and her mind widened. We let our warriors to war before they are eighteen, and I am not asking her to fight."

"She's gone through enough," Ignitus disagreed. "And Galeah is not here to train her; none of us are proficient in wind. Isn't her element inclined to be wild with your cure? Especially if a fury is so lethal?"

"She has shown tremendous control," Terrador said. "And as for visions, she is closely bound to Cynder—I believe in more ways than one. Your heart will always be looking for Kaboa, as well as what happened to the embryos, since she disappeared. I believe what you see in the pool is a result of that, for we cannot gaze upon the ancestors. Kaboa was strong and, if she were alive, we would have well known by now."

"I can't help myself." Ignitus sighed, drooping. "Gaul has said he killed her and sought revenge against me in claims of her ripping his

eye out." There was a touch of pride in his voice there, I was sure. "But he would not have had the time or ability to hide her body, nor care to hide the hatchling's bodies."

"Are you aware that this would not be the first instance of a dragon's body vanishing after death?" Terrador said delicately. "It is rare to the point of fable, but the transition to becoming an ancestor can carry the body along. There is the tale of Iceerus, a good age ago, a scholar and warrior who led the ancient Guardians of the time to capture Malefor. His body vanished in an icy wind before they could lay him to rest."

"I am well aware." The touch of anger in Ignitus' voice surprised me. "And I am well aware she could easily have buried the eggs herself. Terrador, don't think I haven't looked for every possible explanation." He sighed tiredly, even as it caught in his throat. "I've had a long time to try to understand..."

The elder Guardian nodded, reaching one huge wing over Ignitus and letting it rest on his back. "As have I. Look as us now, Ig. Look how we've changed. I don't think this is what any of us expected when we were chosen as Guardians."

"We're meant to be teachers, damn this war," Ignitus agreed tiredly. "What has become of us, Terrador? All of us? When Cyril's family and city was set ablaze over petty racism, when Myst's peaceful people were massacred and she used as a tool for bloodshedâ€"Spyro even more soâ€"when the unborn are deemed fit by anyone for murder, and one of our own kind lights the kindling of a thousand-year war?"

"If I knew, Ignitus, I would tell you," Terrador rumbled, stretching his wings out until the bones creaked. "But we cannot control in what times we were hatched and reared. All who live in such times should come to regret it, and all we're left to ponder on is what to do with the time given to us. I choose to believe you were meant to find Kaboa, Ignitus, and that you were meant to find love with her. If that is so, that means Cynder was meant to find her way to where she is now. And that, old friend, that is an encouraging thought."

* * *

><p>Spyro

I lounged, for lack of a better term. Gaul apparently knew enough to create a proper dragon's throne. It was quickly made and rough, the curve of it a bit wrong and the plush seating uncomfortable. The sheep they'd brought me for food was good enough, of course.

The strange pantheress was chained to Gaul's chair and his proximity to her worried me. I'd need Dragon Time to beat him to her, and that was an ability I did not possess. Being here was hard; the air of the Well seemed to hold a pressure that weighed against my scales, and a deep burning anger flooded my veins whenever I looked at Gaul or any of the apes. It confused me. Before then, I'd felt more along the lines of pity for all but the one-eyed tyrant. The anger burned, as did the unknown longing to run to the cat, whose name I'd learned was Terra.

Those emotions, as well as my own inhibitions, made it very hard to stop my shadows from contorting into true tainted aura.

And throughout it all, Gaul eyed me dangerously. I knew the Ape King to be crafty, and his one eye following me set my hackles up. If I so much as stepped towards his area, one of his hands would finger the hilt of the falchion he cradled in his lap like a child, daring me to approach. His eyes held a clear warning, scorching festering holes into me.

"She's of so much more value to you than me, you know. To me, she's almost a waste of resources," he had cautioned when I'd come too close, flicking the end of his gargantuan sword so it just barely nicked her tail. The bound and blinded cat hadn't cried out, though a deep growl had budded in her chest.

I glanced at Sparx's hiding spot warily, feeling like a fool. I'd trapped us better than we had been before. I could only hope Cynder would come soon, and before it was too late.

65. LESSONS LEARNED

Cynder

"Do we have to?" I whined to the very best of my ability, trying my best to shove all vestiges of my old sarcastic bravado into my voice.

It was a bad attempt. The question ended up sounding, and being, much realer than I had intended.

Kaboa sighed, sounding just as tired and wrecked as I was. I could tell my actions were hurting her, pretending that bombshell hadn't dropped. But I was in no fit state to deal with any of it, and it made dragging my paws towards the Chronicler all the more painful.

"Yes, young dragon."

I tried not to flinch at Ignitus' pet name for us.

"I need your help," she continued. "I fear I'm half the cause of his feeble state of mind, and there are things you should see in the library he cannot depart from."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" A low growl rumbled in my throat. "Why can't any of you damned Guardians do it for yourselves?" My chest felt empty and barren. "Not even your spirit mumbo-jumbo Chronicler can do it. Why us? Why me? We're kids. I left to save Volteer after one day of training, Kaboa. One day. My friends and family are hurt, dead, or at risk of dying. I didn't ask for this. They didn't deserve it."

"Cynder, stop." It was half a snarl and half a plea.

I paced into the strange library after her, and my heart gave a tiny jump at the sheer number of books. Kaboa paced towards one shelf, hooked her claws into a black book, and lugged it to me, letting it fall open. Her paw glowed blue and the book floated up and turned before my eyes, fluttering systematically, revealing an image.

A dark hatchling suspended in the air, chained. My eyes flitted over the silver marking on its forehead and those familiar horns, if stubbier. It was the face and form that swam within the reflection of my childhood.

"Wha-what is this?" I squeaked.

"That," Kaboa said tiredly, "is what destiny said would transpire, for lack of a better explanation. We do not know what changed it; it was likely an event from some outside force."

A white book floated from the shelves as I once more fell into a sitting position, my mind trying and struggling to wrap itself around that.

"And if," Kaboa continued, her voice heavy, "this destiny did transpire, the Ice King would not have been dispatched as you did." The book opened. A terror of a black dragon stretched its wings to the skies, a scarred white hatchling held almost delicately in its mouth. I could tell that the image would give me nightmares. "Myst would never have been revived. Spyro, in his bid to free Volteer, would have unknowingly massacred her along with the Ice King. Nobody would know of her to mourn her, and her last sight would be of her parents' mangled bodies."

"As for your friend the blood dragon, his story could have been just as terrible, but you have changed him. You have helped Spyro tremendously and even now he waits for you." Her tail flicked and a shimmering pool rose from the floor. It looked just like the pool of visions back at the Temple. "Be grateful of what you do have, little one, because both Spyro and yourself, as well as others, could have done much worse without you."

"If I may intrude."

That voice set my hackles up, and my lips writhed into a snarl before I forced them to be still. Kaboa wanted me to be semi-polite to the old bastard and I supposed I owed her at least that much.

He was old, tall and withered. I'd seen spines on dragon chins, but never a beard. Something about him looked exhausted, like he'd never gotten any sleep. His wings looked thin as paper, visible veins bulging through the tattered leathery membranes. He walked with a certain droop to his step, like his legs didn't work quite right anymore.

It was much harder to be mad at him when he looked like he should have been dead a thousand years ago.

"Soâ€|" I muttered quietly into the awkward silence. "You here for a reason?"

"I thought you may appreciate this being returned," the ancient dragon said, holding out one paw pad-up. Blue light blossomed forth and expanded, shimmering before vanishing to leave the hopelily in its place. "And for what little it is worth, I apologize for my own transgressions."

There was an edge to his voice, like it was tugging for a matching apology. But I was not quite there yet. I doubted I ever would be,

and elected to play dumb rather than tempt the ball of raw rage crawling back at me from its new imagined home in a miraculously fiery pit of the ocean.

"Thanks," I muttered tersely as he pawed it over. I slipped the enchanted charm back around my neck. "What's your actual name, anyway? You don't seem to be lacking a craw anymore."

He sighed and rolled his eyes, but I could tell he took it for what it was—the closest thing to a peace offering he was likely to get. "Iceerus, Cynder. You may address me as such."

That name sounded familiar. I blinked tiredly, searching blankly through my memories until it clicked and made all too much sense. "You're one of Cyril's ancestors, right?" I asked, vaguely remembering one of the Ice Guardian's ancestral rants. "You were famous and no one knew how you died."

No wonder he had his stubbornness shoved up where the sun don't shine.

"Something to those regards," Iceerus agreed, though I got the feeling he didn't appreciate my tone. "We have much to discuss and not time enough if you are to make it to the Well of Souls before it is too late for your friend. A new page has just been added to his book, Kaboa. It's finally converted." He turned to me and a purple book floated forwards. Shadow seemed to writhe around it, but not in the harsh way one would expect.

"Hold on, converted?" I asked, tail twitching.

"Since destiny changed, dragons' books have been changing to the new set of events at random, as far as we can tell," Kaboa murmured, her eyes searching every inch of the book in a way I assumed meant the cover had changed, and changed drastically. "It has been erratic at best and completely random at worst. Myst's book started changing first, gaining pages it did not have before, but at a slower pace."

I blinked. "I don't get it."

"That is our general consensus on the matter," Kaboa said dryly. "It doesn't make sense, Cynder. Life can be like that. Even we don't have the information we need to figure out what happened to the timestream. What does the book say?"

"Not much, but a new picture came to be," the Chronicler said, looking more than slightly perturbed.

The book flipped open to a page and my heart nearly broke, until I looked again. "...What?"

Spyro's scales were blackened with what I could only assume was tainted shadow and his eyes glowed yellow. But his expression was one of rapt confusion as he stared at something out of sight. Half his face was arranged into a snarl, eye-ridge lowered and lips pulled over his teeth, but the other side of his face was anything but tainted—the eye-ridge raised and mouth curled half in amusement and half in exasperation.

"Seriouslyâ€| What?"

"I agree," Iceerus said tiredly. "I suggest you hasten there, though waiting may have its merits as well." He turned his gaze to Kaboa, an unreleased sigh evident in his voice. "Do as you wish." He turned, bones creaking, and left. "Just be sure to explain the origins of Malefor and do not seek to change what must transpire by the end."

Kaboa's tailblade twitched and sliced through the air, fast enough to cause a slight sniiiiiiikk. I turned to witness one of the most feral grins I'd seen yetâ€"on anyone else, that is.

It felt a bit like looking in a mirror.

* * *

><p>Myst

The apes were restless and I was scared for them. They seemed as afraid of the coming night as the dragons did. Viriti seemed to have gained a sort of nervous energy about her, paws twitching even as she left whatever room we were in. The Guardians were worried for Cynder. Terrador peeled through the great atlas in the library, Ignitus stayed hours gazing into the pool of visions, and Cyril and Volteer worked to strengthen the wards on the temple in a weary silence instead of bickering for once. The unusual seriousness worried me. Viriti's parents had been working on various things that didn't mean much to me.

Kuro and I had been preparing, and it hadn't been hard to keep quiet. We planned to leave that very day, if all went well. I got the feeling that the Guardians were happy to leave my care to my old friend, since they had other things to focus on. While Viriti wasn't blind to our preparation, she would only needle her lip with her teeth, enough to draw blood, and move on.

Guilt weighed on me for that, but it wasn't the most important thing going on. Kuro and I intended to leave within the hour, and I was practicing with my armor at his insistence. He'd managed to corral the Guardians into letting us use the training area, claiming he'd gotten my armor just for thatâ€"so I wouldn't get hurt practicing. Worried of my fate should the temple be attacked and myself separated from them again, they had warily agreed.

I buried my teeth in straw, bracing myself as the dummy kept running until my grasp on its tail brought it crashing down. To my left, a group of the apes circled one of the largest dummies predatorily, taking turns to dart in and tear out bits of wood and straw with daggers, falchions and a single sword called a katana, wielded by a black ape. They reminded me of a wolf pack, or at least the stories I'd heard of them.

The dummy was brought down when Thistle leapt onto its shoulders, digging twin daggers into its neck and cleaving its head clean off. Three more dummies appeared around them and the apes twisted to meet them. I glanced at where Ignitus stood in the other room, head lowered and gazing into the pool. They wouldn't let me even try with the largest ones.

Only one way to prove that wrong. I darted forwards, wind forming blades around my claws, my heart beating faster. My paws drummed on cold stone as I bunched my haunches and threw myself into the air. I landed heavily on the dummy's back, my wingblades whipping down as I dug my extended claws into its neck and rent head from shoulders with the crackle of ripping straw and crack of breaking wood, just as I'd seen my friend do.

It crackled into nothing as I landed on my paws to the sound of a thud behind me, and turned to see the black ape meeting another dummy's strike that would have hit me. He disemboweled it with a dagger clutched in his other hand as Thistle looked at me with a grin.

"First lesson," he barked, drawing the two-handed sword on his back. "To fight like ape, don't fight alone."

He turned to meet the last dummy's swing as more appeared. He barked something in their guttural language and the others backed out of the ring, but kept their weapons ready. As we advanced, I reached for his sword, sending wind to cocoon around it, lengthening the reach and sharpening it.

He grinned. "Second lesson." He whipped around and threw a dagger, which struck a smaller dummy attempting to sneak up behind us. "Always watch back."

66. VIRITI'S GIFT

Cynder

"So this Malimar bloke is the Dark Master?" I asked carefully as Kaboa nodded. "And he was a screwed up purple dragon? Love-er-ly. You could at least tell me a weakness or something. I really don't want to deal with an older purple. The possessed General was fun enough."

"Which is why we should endeavor to get Spyro out of there before we have two on our paws," Kaboa agreed tiredly. "Now, I believe I can answer one more question. We weren't sure about how you had your elements for a long time, either. But the spirits that appeared to you may answer that question."

My heart beat against my ribs as a stinging lance of longing struck through it. "How?"

"That will take some explaining. I believe the best place to begin is with the ancestors. I understand your dragonfly village is not aware of their afterlife, and neither am I. Many races hold what they do know as a closely guarded secret, if they know anything at all. However, our ancestors are different."

She held out a paw, shadows wreathed around it. Slowly, they hugged her dexterous fingers and melded to her scales. Suddenly the shape of it changed, separating into long streams and forming something like an open hopelily, leaving no paw at all and only the flower-shaped shadow.

"To put it most simplistically, a dragon is made up of the soul, the

body and the mind." Her paw reformed back to normal. "The soul or spirit of a dragon is their element, the mind is formed of our experiences, and the body is the vessel. When the body dies and can no longer host the other two, in most cases, the spirit will bind itself around the mind, preserving it to become the ancestor of that dragon. However, the longer an ancestor exists, the more their mind wavers and merges with their element until they are one and the same."

"...Alright," I said slowly, wondering how this all related to me.

"There are times when this is not the case, such as the swamp beast you fought, but they are not relevant to this," Kaboa continued. "Now, twelve years ago, on the day of the Temple raid, four of the oldest ancestors disappeared. We had thought they had decided to move on, as they had not had a happy life before then and had lingered longer than most. However, they appeared to you today. Now, my theory is that they, and their elements in turn, bound themselves to you. It would also explain the great magic reservoirs you've built up, as yours already rival the Guardians in strength, a feat only a purple dragon should be able to manage. Wind and time are trickier, but I believe Myst is the origin of the former."

"Waitwaitwait." I shook my head, trying to sort and store the deluge of information. "So, I'm possessed by a bunch of old people since I was born and Myst too, sort of? What?"

"Not possessed; with you using their elements, they are likely rarely sentient," Kaboa said carefully. "I think your attempts to reach the blocked electric breath woke them. As for Myst, the medicine to heal her eyes was actually meant to rearrange her three aspects into a less convoluted rhythm. A breach between mind and body caused the problem, so, in theory, the mixture started to meld the spirit and body and rearrange it so they connected to the eyes again. But this may also have caused her element to meld into you, as you were often close to her."

"Okaaaay then," I muttered. I had wanted this information so badly only a day ago, but now it seemed strange and useless, especially as I just couldn't seem to wrap my head around it. "I don't get it."

Finally getting the damned answer felt so freaking lackluster if I put it like that.

"I'm sorry, little one." Her muzzle pressed against my forehead, the comforting warmth helping some. "But that is all we have time for. The spirits are wandering tonight and, if you leave soon, I will be able to meet you and fight by your side to enter the mountain."

She turned, tail swishing, and I followed. She reached into a cranny in the wall I swear I couldn't see at all, and pawed over a huge assortment of gems. "I have placed magic on your parents' gift, Cynder. There should be more space within it, and the pocket you occasionally have used for your brother will stay the same, but nothing can be crushed in it. I wish, deep in my heart of hearts, that I could give you something more, or do more for you."

Her paw rose and crevices formed in the great floor, slabs of stone

disappearing to show a mountainous landscape of jutting cliffs and dying grasses. The impossibility of looking down at a place like that from a temple in the middle of the sea messed with my head, but I quickly wrote it off as magic.

"This is the closest to the hub of Malefor's influence I can send you. You must go east from here. Did the Guardians have a compass for you?"

"Yeah," I said, pulling the seldom-used trinket from my bag. It was a sphere of rock with a metal nub on one side. Terrador's instructions were to raise it in a very loose elemental grip, and the nub would point west.

Kaboa nodded approvingly. I gave it a try and blinked when the nub pointed straight down. "Huh?"

Kaboa smiled. "Dragon compasses use one's element, or your earth in this example, to point towards the hub of ancestral magic—a place you happen to be in now. We are not truly in the sea you saw; that is just one of the easiest access points. As you can see" she gestured to the portal—"leaving is much easier. But if you ever have need of us, travel west."

"Alright," I said awkwardly, wondering what to do, before I was pulled into a deep hug with an embarrassing '_oof_.'

"Now, off with you, little one." Kaboa sighed. "And I will meet you as soon as I can."

I turned, heartsick, and took my dive.

* * *

><p>Myst

The armor felt unusually uncomfortable, like it was eating at my scales. Kuro and I stood upon the highest point of the temple's roof, prepped for flight. Bags hung from our bodies, bound tightly and filled with dried meat, spirit gems, bandages and other supplies. Both of us had donned our armor and it glimmered in the dull moonlight as the dawn chased it away.

Viriti startled us both when she landed beside us, gripping something tight in her forepaws. I looked forward and flinched upon realizing what it was. Two sets of metal battle-claws fell to the roof as she dropped them, looking disgusted at holding the weapons. Spines of blood coated the tops, frozen, sharp and long.

"I made these for you. Supposedly, blood dragon magic is the only thing that can chase off ghosts like what will be coming soon. Mom had me alter the apes' weapons and anything in the old armory." Viriti sounded thoroughly disgusted about the whole ordeal, and not because of the blood. "I got these for you and messed with them. Dragon spirits are mostly made of your magic, so if any attack you, your elements aren't gonna help."

She turned, a terribly uncharacteristic stiffness to her ears and tail. My heart lurched.

"Viri, I'm sorry," I murmured, feeling that I should say it just in case her worries were real and we would never come back. "I don't want to hurt you."

Her ears drooped. "Then stop it. Don't put the only two dragons who care about me and aren't Momma or Dad in such stupid danger. You're the only friends I've got."

"I'm sorry," was all I could say.

I flinched when I realized Kuro didn't even seem to be listening; he was staring east, towards home, with an unspoken longing that sent a chill through my bones. He shot into the sky, pumping his wings in an almost rhythmic manner.

I had no real option but to follow, grabbing Viriti's gift as I pummeled the wind under my wings and shot after him, worry eating at my stomach.

67. MEMORY SICKNESS

Cynder

The flight to the Well was relatively uneventful. A few murders of Dreadwings attacked and were quickly and efficiently removed by bolts of electricity. It was fun to watch the bats drop like flies. The parched and jagged landscape rushed beneath me. Plants were becoming less and less common, giving way to craggy grey stone jutting from the earth like unhealthy growing things.

I shivered as the Well came into sight. I'd always somehow figured that nightmares would be nightmares and that the place couldn't possibly be that bad in reality. I was right in a way. It was worse. Every detail that came into focus as I drew closer only sent my stomach sinking further towards the stone spires below.

Ancestors, I missed talking to people during these flights. My head drooped. What would Sparx call this thing? It was towering and spined, oozing green venom and purple light.

Big Purple? No, that was more like something I'd call it. Doomy-Doomy Death Mountain? That sounded right. Screw everyone, I thought wearily. I now knew no other name for the damn place. I could not bury Sparx in the village as I should, with all of the rights he deserved, and so I would call this damn place something in his memory. Naming the roots of evil like that would be appreciated...if he was there.

I gritted my teeth, wincing as I nicked my tongue, and decided stupidity was the best source of distraction. My lips writhed, as did the fire in my gut, and I shot a roiling plume of flame into the air around me as I landed on a spire of rock poking from fields of mist before the great dark mountain. I roared defiance at the place, my talons raking the stone, bringing an ugly shriek and spark of fire with it.

"I'm not afraid of you!" I howled at the mountain.

The moons went black.

It had begun.

* * *

><p>Myst

My wings ached by the time we got there. The island looked so dead with no one on it; the towering trees with their amethyst three-pointed leaves still whistled as the breeze danced by. Most of the island's outskirts had gone untouched; the villagers had stuck to the hidden places, where the war could not so easily reach us.

Night was coming quickly. We'd been held up by a group of apes riding dreadwings. I'd hesitated, remembering they were bespelled. Kuro had torn them apart mercilessly with great lances of condensed shadow, until not a single body had fallen to the ocean's ravenous maw in a single piece. He was starting to scare me, with that certain feverous longing in his eyes burning his soul away.

Now that it was too late to turn back, Viriti's words haunted me.

In front of me, Kuro put his head on a tree-stump, one of the ones near the edge of the clearing where my parents had been killed. I swallowed dryly when I saw a spine of bone sticking from the middle of the rock, a huge claw buried in stone, phalanges glimmering. It had to be the one I had ripped from Spyro when he was the General, though I had no idea why it had become stuck. Trying to hold the rising grief in, I searched for any traces of my parents' bones and was half glad and half heartbroken to find none. I remembered where they lay for the last tiâ€"

_ "Dad, what's happening? What's going on? Dad, you gotta get up!" Small forepaws grasped the frill on the side of his face. "We gotta go home! Momma's hurt, too! You need to come inside like you say I need to when I'm hurt!" _

_ Dark red everywhere and they were lying there with gashes and bent all wrong and a cold chuckle rent the winds and the shadow was all over her. His teeth and claws were huge and bloody and she was so angry when he pounced she bit the foot that held her and he screamed and the world shook and shook until the toe cracked and ripped and she was flying to strike stone, hard and unyielding. _

_ And his roar shattered her ears as teeth closed around her horn and his claws were sharp and crushing and painpainpainpainpainâ€" and everything was dimming and the scratches kept coming and the great jaws were snapping and stabbing and she looked desperately at her parents, knowing they'd help as soon as they could. They'd never leave her to face this. Why weren't they moving? Vision was blurring, blurring, blurring, gone in the blackness, and painpainpainpainpainâ€" _

I came to, shaking and screaming and sobbing without any voice left to grieve. My body felt brittle; it was like my scars were searing with fire and my vision was flickering and blurry. I looked around, desperately seeking Mom or Dad or Cyn, wilting when the blob of red-and-black refined into Kuro. I fell to my belly, panting and shaking until it seemed my bones might shatter.

"W-what happened?" I muttered helplessly, burying my muzzle in my paws as I tried to hear Kuro over the whispers of remembered screeches and roars clawing painfully into my head.

He looked lost and guilty, teeth clenched and eyes dilated in worry. A large paw fell upon my back and rubbed gently as he pulled me into a hug. I had to fight the urge to scream and claw and bite at the sudden constriction.

"I'm so, so sorry. I should never have brought you here," Kuro murmured, his black scales turning almost ashen grey as he paled. "Why didn't you tell me you had memory sickness?"

The moons eclipsed before my questions could reach my throat.

It had begun.

* * *

><p>(AN: Wow, that one came out of nowhere. If you didn't guess, memory sickness is PTSD. What Kuro didn't know is that it can be months or years before symptoms start, and if anything was going to trigger it, that would. Not a wise move, going there.)_

68. THE MASKS WE WEAR

_Reading my story _Fade Away: Before the Legend _is highly recommended to fully understand this chapter. It's only about 5000 words._

* * *

><p>Spyro

"_A half cannot truly hate that which makes it whole." - Kilgharrah/The Great Dragon, BBC's Merlin._

The waiting half-killed me. I worried for Sparx, that he'd starve or get caught. He was so small and I didn't have a clue how often dragonflies had to eat. As the days crawled by, not much changed. Gaul and I were at an uneasy ceasefire as I did my best to hide my fretting. The Well pulled at me, like it was trying to tug my thudding heart away to devour. I was left to fear what the eclipse might bring, as the morning and evening passed in a hailstorm of worry. The apes seemed to grow energized, but a great weight fell upon me, fighting to tug me to the floor and force me to submit.

Dread accumulated within me as the moons drew closer and closer, and still Cynder did not come. Then, finally, they seemed to merge into the maw of a great beast and the world around me felt like it may as well shatter.

The pain was horrible. As soon as the eclipse began, a great pressure began building behind my skull and within my bones. Terrible pain lanced from my neck, sending fire dancing within my scales.

Horror filled me. I had been a fool to come here.

A great wave of agony sent me toppling onto my side as the false taint around me solidified into a real one. I glared at Gaul, and fire I hadn't called leapt to my throat as my wings stretched out. Holes ripped into the membranes as I grew, the pain burning and festering like fire.

"Letâ€"herâ€"go," my body howled without me. I was already eye-level with Gaul and he seemed to be shrinking. A contingent of apes were thereâ€"they'd been speaking to their kingâ€"and I fell upon them like a great inferno, carried along with my body's wild crueltys.

My paw pinned the first and huge jaws tore the top half away with a mind-numbing scream and a horrific splay of blood and sound.

The others didn't fare much better as great splatters of acid spat from my mouth and scorched through clothing, fur, skin, flesh and bone. My stomach flipped at the smell of rancid, scorched flesh, and I wanted so badly to empty it, feeling the streams of warm, freshly-spilt blood flowing down my scarred chin and chest.

"Ah, General," Gaul hissed, getting up from his throne and wielding his swords with faint relish. "I see your loyalty has swayed." The tip of one falchion rested on Terra's shoulder and, though I had no voluntary movement, I felt myself start.

When had I learned her name?

"Leave her alone." My voice rumbled like a stampede, but my body stayed back, eyes fixed on the threatening sword.

"I make no promises." Gaul smiled, his fake eye glowing like venom. "Why don't we just sit down and have a little chat about you, this little bargaining chip"â€"his sword nicked the side of Terra's neck ever so slightly, letting a little rivulet of blood trickle through black furâ€" "and that _pet_ of yours you've been hiding behind to escape us."

A rush of foreign guilt welled inside me and faint whispering memories teased at my mind from miles and miles away. The smell of rancid meat, a great pain, soft paws helping me from somewhere warm and dark, the glimmer of the green gem in Gaul's socket in someplace cramped, dark and dingy. Foul language bursting from me, trying to hurt them like they had hurt Terra, who I had wanted to be my mother. The beating I took for it, her telling me to never ever swear again.

_Years of ferality as the General, years of blood and hurt and pain and anger and a fierce loathing for everythingâ€" _Master_, those I fought, my allies, my prisoners. The looks of horrid disappointment on the faces of the Guardians when I'd first taken to the skies to raze the land below._

The memories had been so unlike this before, mere shadows of this pain and fury. Now they were full and so undeniably a part of me that it physically hurt.

_Seeing Cynder for that first time, watching carefully as she slept in the hollow of a giant towering tree in Dante's Freezer, and choosing willfully to leave her be despite the punishment I would later receive. The great burn of jealousy through flesh and bone at

seeing her so young and so woefully innocent of the true meaning of war. Being forced to leave the trap for her by means of the 'god' of Tall Plains and its dark crystal._

When that had failed, being directly ordered to dispose of her myself, laying in wait beneath the volcano. The chase, Ignitus' attack and subsequent capture. Even then, being glad that little dragon, who could make me even more jealous and angry, was safe.

And then we'd met again and I'd truly not wanted to fight her, but even more wished the torment she wrought on me would end, that the endless longing would leave. And so I attacked her in earnest and only stopped when time had been running out.

And then we met again and she'd bested me, even after Master had possessed me. The feeling of convexity coursing through me and pushing the taint back into the crystal. The raging wish that somehow I could be more like her.

And, high-strung on the most powerful magic of the world, wrapped within a realm that did not depend greatly on logic anyway, that wish had been granted.

The years of torment, the pain of Terra's refusal for me to call her Mom, of thinking she'd been killed, years in that dusty cell, my anger, everything but shades of the General's memories, more and more of the meager things that had made me all I was back then had rushed back into the crystal with it.

I realized slowly that that was all I was. What was left after that. Something small and inexperienced and naive. Something beautiful that I had longed for. I found myself bound again to all the pain and remorse of a child who I no longer was, underneath the tainted eclipsed moons.

And I accepted him. I had no will to be angry for all the things that were not his fault, and finally accepted that. The only ones at fault were the bastard and his army. And I was quite happy to help him make them pay.

The transformation was short-lived as I began to contract once more on myself, my ripped wings mending as they shrank. The darkness lightened and loosened, and one eye remained normal as the other lightened even further. Venom bubbled forth from under my pads, leaving my footprints sunk and smouldering in the heart of Malefor's prison as I raced forward, at unity with the angry fire in my limbs.

Around me, the world faded into shades of blue and slowed as the air took on the consistency of molasses, and what Gaul had been saying, not that I'd been paying him any heed, slowed to a deep crawl.

* * *

><p>(AN: I have a DeviantArt account with a LOT of LOC-related art from various stories, as well as what Spyro looks like here, under GoldenGriffiness, and a group which has all the LOC-related stuff not by me in the favorites under Legend-of-Cynder-Art, if anyone would like some visuals of what characters or scenes look

like.)_

69. THE DISADVANTAGES OF TEMPER TANTRUMS

Cynder

Kaboa was not long in coming. A twister of shadow appeared in thin air before coalescing into a flurry of long, lithe limbs and a growl. Though she seemed whole, alive and normal, she stood on thin air as if it were solid, and her twitching tail passed right through the stone under my feet.

I still didn't know what to say to her. Part of me wanted to be alone right now and I could see that she well knew it. She worked her mouth uncomfortably for a few minutes before turning angry eyes towards the mountain.

"I haven't much time before the eclipse ends. The Chronicler has slowed it down as best he could so I can be here longer, but I fear that will also aid our enemies. I'm game for busting up some damned bastards before I go. Shall we?"

I nodded stiffly, snapping my wings out and down and launching towards the mountain and its towering beacon of purple light.

Kaboa shadowed me from above, dwarfing me. "I would be grateful if you would allow me to do this. Save your strength."

She stretched her neck out and shot a roiling stormfront of black haze at the first murder of dreadwings that came crawling out of various caves and crannies. They were riderless, so I'm fairly sure their deaths were a surprize to nobody. A low murmur reverberated through the air as a large black dreadwing covered in murky-yellow glowing armor--mostly yellow, but with bands of green, red, white and black--came swooping down towards us.

Kaboa faltered, irritation clear about her mouth. "I think your friend got an upgrade."

"It's just armor," I muttered. "If it's in the way, you smash it." I sent a bolt of rock from my paws, but it shattered in thin air meters from the beast and its rider, as though it had struck an invisible wall. "Or... apparently not. What is this shit?"

"That's elemental armor. It makes elemental-magic attacks ineffective until it's overloaded. But, with this set-up, it's most likely serving for simply shielding the wearer. And he seems to have most elements covered... I could use convexity, but that would be dangerous. And I don't like the idea of escaping, only to have to deal with this beast _and_ Gaul together later."

I growled. "Great. I guess we just have to blast it with everything until it breaks." With an irritable snarl, I sent a thundering bolt of electricity to meet the barrier. At almost the same moment, I snuck one paw into my bag and clutched one of my purple gems, crushing it and absorbing it.

I darted forward, growling when my outstretched fortpaws slid off the dreadwing's armor, fire growing in my gut. Then I closed my eyes and

released the pent-up energy.

Fire colored the skies. The fury blasted by, hammering the shield and sending the dreadwing barreling away, but leaving both it and its rider unharmed.

"You're shitting me," I snarled.

Kaboa's muzzle was wrinkled in worry, and I flinched at that as I glanced down to find thin traces of taint twining around my paws. I gritted my teeth and forced it back. I knew I couldn't hide from this anger forever, but it would only hurt me now.

I shot bursts of ice next, which exploded into billows of steam upon meeting the barrier, before launching myself forward...

...and bouncing off again as the dreadwing shot a blade of fear towards me. I dodged it "barely" by somersaulting under the beast as drops of water fell from its ruffled fur, striking my scales with spikes of cold. I wrinkled my nose, believing it to be sweat, before realizing the droplets were laced only slightly with the horrid stench of the dreadwing.

Not sweat, water. Where the hell had water come from? The sky was painfully dry; the only source of water could be...my ice attack.

The steam had made its way through. Vaguely, I remembered Ignitus explaining to me that, once, ice and water had been one element, but they had broken apart. Water was hardly my best element, as it had come to me as a side-effect of mixing the heat of my fire with my ice, but I didn't have anything else to try. I searched for the power, coaxing fire through my veins and ice to my scales.

The two pressures collided within me and it felt like they were fighting to tear my body apart, flesh, blood and bone. Every scale was on fire and freezing and make it sto" _

The pressure pushed too far and snapped out of me in a halo of icicles and embers that mixed and bled into each other. Stormclouds swirled into existence, coloring the air around me in shades of gray as, finally, the armor was overloaded with a great
creee-eak. _

Aparently, you can have too much of a 'good' thing. The abused armor began to glow red-hot as both dreadwing and rider shrieked in agony. I shut my eyes as it grew brighter still, bright enough that the light pierced into my head, even through my closed eyelids. The world around me shook; wind was beating at my scales.

Oh, right, I'm falling... I should do something about _

The world lit up with a cacophonous crash, pressure hurling me towards cold stone.

It was only in looking back that I realized something had been growing in my friend. Something unknown, lonely and ravenous. A reflection of it had been in me the whole time, too: a great longing to see these shores that had once been drenched in blood. There were no good memories here. Not the gentle hum of Mom's lullabies, nor the bustle of a town. Only crimson tides and shattering pain.

Something was changing in my vision as the waking nightmare faded away. The pain faded into a ghostly ache, the ghostly ache into an unpleasant tremble. Kuro had gone silent and I forced myself to my paws with a groan, looking up to see him staring brokenly, seemingly having forgotten me.

"K-Kuro?" Something was terribly wrong. Something was tugging at my belly, a longing so fierce and so foreign, and I shook. It reminded me too much of the grasping effect his poison had had on me.

Kuro croaked something indecipherable as I forced myself not to follow his gaze and approached on shaking legs. Something was wrong with his neckâ€"a grasping tendril of shadow foreign to him, a string of purple tint that sent my stomach reeling in fearful recognition.

It was the General's, a tint of his magic that soaked in the moonlight and clawed and burrowed into my friend's scales. His eyes had a faint white shine to them. How long had it been there? He'd never met Malefor. He'd never met the General. How?

Moonlight cast the world into pale shades of green and orange. It was the first night, and I hadn't been able to sleep for the life of me. Seeing Kuro again had brought back flashes of their broken bodies, flashes of blood and gore and pain.

And so I slipped into his room with faltering paws.
"Kuro?"

"Hey there," he said gently, long neck twisting to look at me.
"Ghosts chasing you too?"

I could only nod. "It still feels like it happened yesterday." I shivered. "I justâ€| Kuro, I can't stop thinking of them there. I keep thinking of that dead bird we found, how it was black and smelly. I can't stop seeing them like that." My paws were shaking.

"Hey, hush." A wing stretched to draw me in, pulling me against his side. "Hush. It's alright, I promise."

I gave him my best Cynder-glare, drawing a dry chuckle from him.

"Well, not alright. Nothing about this is. But you've got to remember that we are our soul and our heart, never our body." His paw curled over to tap my chest as the palm of his wing ruffled my head. "They aren't there anymore. And, if it makes you feel better, I went back. I didn't have anywhere else to goâ€| I buried them for you, Myst."

His brow creased in pain. "I found that damned claw and I used my element to fuse it to the shadows on the ground, to show that the

Dark Master isn't unstoppable. Damned thing didn't go without a fight, either. It was like it was trying rip into me when I used my magic on it. My only regret was not finding you to bury with them, but now I'm glad I never did."

It was some small fraction of peace, but still I was left sobbing, curled up against his side until the world faded into nightmares, but at least he had been there to wake me up.

Ignitus had said he worried for Spyro, because the taint would get harder to fight the closer the moons drew to one another. And I had heard Spyro talking to Cynder, speaking of the great draw the General had had to do the Dark Master's bidding. Of how, even then, something had fought and fought and fought to send him fleeing from themâ€"from Cynder and the Guardiansâ€"and how he had felt they were still enemies, even right before they had left.

Kuro's and my maddening draw here suddenly made a terrible kind of sense. I reached a paw forward and batted futilely at his long foreleg. "K-Kuro, c'mon. Th-this was a bad idea. We've got to go home..."

The only response I got was another choked expletive, but this time I could make it out.

"D-daddy."

I spun around. There were shining jewels in the ethers of our ravaged home. Noâ€"not jewels. A sea of eyes, an ocean of translucent glowing faces. A longing keen swam through the thickening air, resonating from my friend's chest.

And in the center, right in front of where our home used to be, surrounded by friends from forever ago, towered a lythe opalescent spirit. Beside her, a burly dragon of gentle shadows. My paws sent me into a mad dash before I could even think, forced into action by the thrill of loss and love. The sets of blood-claws latched to my armor were pulled back by the movement, and some small part of me wondered how and why they had grown so warm.

I barely registered the look of horror on Mom's face as my body hurled me into what should have been an embrace, but only sent me sprawling into mud and cold air. The metal contraptions on my back flashed red and, where they glowed, the translucent forms seemed to warp and melt away. My legs felt like old roots, anchored to the earth beneath me. Something was tugging from beyond the glow of Viriti's gift, trying to lurch my element, heart and soul away from me. I was left plastered to the cold earth.

Kuro wasn't so lucky.

71. A LOVE LONG LOST

Myst

Kuro raced towards me, but as he moved it seemed like the black and the red was being drawn away from him, until all that was left was a specter of my friend. An apparition with glowing garnets for eyes and mere shadows for a body.

The taint had been left behind in the air, a mass of twining serpents of shadow and hatred. Heat sparked against my tail and I struggled to turn my aching head, the throbbing pain fighting my desire to work out what was happening. There was a sort of numbness to it, but the world came crashing back into focus when I saw what I had brushed against.

A spike of bone pierced the ground, augmented by huge, cracked phalanges. Memories battered at me as I realized what the forsaken object was. A sting of salt and rust reminded me of blood, and finally the shaking was too much and I was flying and why could I still taste blood and scale and flesh and painpainpainpainâ€|_

_The General snapped Mom's neck like a twig and her red body was fallingfallingfallingâ€"

Mom's...notâ€|red...

And the world faded away.

~...~

_ "__Hey, Shady, get your ass off the ground. You'll want to hear this too." Something prodded my side._

_ I groaned, forcing my head up. "'Rina, what the he...ck? Don't talk like that with her here. Dad'll skin me if he hears we swore." I gestured at the little curled up ball of white._

_ "__She's in dreamland, don't worry." Rose eyes blinked lazily. "Now c'mon. Little windy won't be waking up anytime soon. I heard Cyril and Volteer talking."_

_ I rolled my eyes tiredly, pondering the pros and cons of going back to sleep. "You mean you spied on them. Rin, we want the Guardians to like us."_

_ She snorted. "You lot want them to like you. I want to go home. It sounds like this meeting might help me get there." Teeth clicked on my tailblade and I was jerked upright. "Now get off your ass and let's go!"_

_ I grumbled tiredly, knowing resistance was futile.
"Delinquent."_

_ She grinned toothily at me. "Clown."_

_ I grinned when we were out of the caveâ€"_and Myst's hearing range. I liked my major limbs intact, and I couldn't guarantee they would remain that way if my parents heard about Myst asking what a certain variety of words meant. "Sunny ass."_

_ Yellow lips writhed up in a playful snarl. "Apeface."_

_ Ouch. Going after my face markings?
"Piss-scales."_

_ "__Mascara."_

_ " __Pinkeye. " _

_ " __X-marks-the-spot. " _

_ " __Sunny disposition. " _

_ That seemed to have struck a nerve. "Piss-eyed attention-seeking jester with a baboon ass for a face." _

_ I floundered dramatically before falling to the ground on my back, clutching my chest with a moan. "You've killed me! I give! I give! I concede! You are better than I, fair lady! Uncle! Uncle!" _

_ I went limp with one last dramatic flounder, only to jerk back to 'consciousness' when her nose brushed mine and I was graced with her wicked grin. A jolt traced my limbs. _

_ " __You can bask in my superiority later. We've got a meeting to spy on! " _

_ I rolled my eyes. Personally, I didn't much care what the adults did as long as it didn't mess with me, but since Rina had come I'd learned more about their workings than I would have wished to. Still, that grateful grin was fairly irresistible, as were the flutters in my stomach that came with it. Maybe if I asked her right after helping on one of her silly escapades, she'd finally agree to a date. I didn't see what harm could come from them, after all. _

_ She raced to a tree and clambered up it, claws digging into the wood. I chuckled and followed, though I knew I'd get grief for lagging behind later. I didn't waste half my life away training for a war I'd never be a part of like she did. Before long, we were amidst the huge purple leaves that tickled my scales and nose. I sank to my chest and slunk across the wooden webbing, occasionally leaping to another of the great branches. Moonlight filtered through the bright foliage and painted splashes of light on her scales. Something fought to claw out of my chest and make me ask again, but I forced it down with a hidden sigh. It wouldn't go any better than the last dozen times I'd begged her to give me a chance. _

_ And then we were right above and the voices were filtering through. A prim voice I didn't recognize spoke first. _

_ " __Hush, Volteer. Your inability to speak coherently shant help our case. " _

_ " __No, it's alright." The tight voice of Myst's dad drifted up through the whispering leaves. "We get the gist. You're out of soldiers and need more, and you want to bribe us with society so that we might fight for you. I, for one, would rather not draw Malefor's eyes here, Guardian Cyril, Guardian Volteer. We have given up too much to raise our children in peace, only to now usher them into your war. " _

_ " __We regret what has befallen you, truly. I, for one, disagree with your need to come here," a softer voice interrupted with clear authority. "My mate died a year ago_ _and, with her, the eggs that we were meant to defend. My own would have been among their number. Unborn dragons that had committed no sin, who had no chance to miss the parents they would never know. The Dark Master means to purge our

race from the earth, every dragon, 'ness and child. If we do not fight to stop him, then we accept the fate he has chosen for us." _

This sincerity rallied the others and, before long, it was only Myst's family left silent. As the leaves rustled, I caught a glimpse of the dragon who had changed our fates with his words. Red scales glowed like fire in the filtered moonlight.

~...~

_My wings burned. This was the longest I'd ever flown, as we usually stuck to the ground to avoid detection. My memory seemed hyper-focused on the feeling of Myst clutching my foreleg, her parents' looks of disapproval engraved into the back of my skull. They'd offered to keep the children with them, keep them safe, but they had received only anger. _

Because many of us were weak fliers, we alighted on one of the White Isles, which clearly aggravated Rin. She'd hated how little we could fly at home. Before we'd been on the ground for more than a few seconds, she wrapped her tail around my leg and pulled. Used to her demanding tugs, I followed with a sigh. She treated the adults and older kids in the village with a sort of scorn, and preferred to pull us both away from them as often as she could.

_ "__You know," she murmured when we had our privacy. "I always thought I'd get them to revoke their sentence one day and I'd never see you again, since you wanted to stay with your little troupe so bad." _

_I blinked. "Yeah, I know." _

Where had this come from? For the year she'd been with us, I'd had to discern her feelings through insults and grumbles. For her to now state them so clearlyâ€œ!

_She chuckled. "You're too damn intelligent, you know that? Anyway, now I'm here and you're here and we're leaving together..."

—

_Suddenly she was right in front of me, breath playing across my muzzle. "Shady, I'm sorry I said no so many goddamn times when you asked, and you've done nothing but help me and I _do _notice. I just_â€œ_" Her eyes shut for a moment. "I thought I'd be leaving and then I'd be alone again." _

_A hopeful surge of warmth rose in my chest and I worked my mouth helplessly, searching for a response. Suddenly her forehead was against mine, her short muzzle resting between my eyes. "Is it too late to say yes? As soon as we get settled somewhere, let's try to make this work, okay?" _

For the rest of that day, it felt like I was walking on air.

~...~

_We were lagging behind the flock to talk privately. We'd be reaching our designated meeting spot with the Guardians before the day was

over, and my heart was thrumming with nervous excitement. My eyes were on Mom and Dad, near the rear. Whenever they chanced a glance back, I'd swoop to the side to make sure they didn't see how our wings were brushing. I didn't need a lecture. They already didn't like me hanging out with Rin; they claimed she was a bad influence since the teachers had sent her to us for stealing. But I thought that, if no one tried to help her, how could she learn any different? She had gotten better, after all._

_She'd just made a particularly inappropriate comment about some new general the Dark Armies were supposed to have_â€“_wondering how they thought a _dragon _was the best way to kill other dragons, who would know just how he ticked_â€“_and went on to detail exactly _why _she thought the 'old mad fart' had wanted him in a less-than-pleasant manner._

_Then the sky was ripped in two. A great bolt of silver lightning ripped through the three leading dragons and suddenly it was raining bodies. A great beast hurtled through the villagers, and I reeled to a halt. Great claws grabbed an ice dragon's shoulders and then a great maw was ripping at old Icalie's neck, and then there was both a head and a body falling from the sky and a great sheet of fire was washing over another group, the scent of burnt flesh crawling into my nose. _

Something flipped in my stomach as the great shadow ripped through everyone with a cacophony of snapping limbs and terrified, agonized roars. The world was blurring around me; all I could see was blood. And then he was on my parents and their bodies were falling and my head was so far away. The last thing I saw was Rin's mad dive amidst a flood of blood, bone and gore, as my head grew faint and the horrors were drowned in a sea of black.

~...~

I awoke with a groan. Everything hurt. I stumbled to my paws, seeing red with bleary eyes. My paws were scraped and bleeding. Why? Had I fallen...? Then the memories coursed through me and my stomach rejected them. I lurched forward to empty it with a heave.

_Gasping and coughing, I raced forward, praying it had been a nightmare. But the sight in front of me was horribly real. Blood and death and staring, faded eyes upon cold, lifeless faces_â€“_faces I knew were attached to broken, shattered bodies, and some to nothing at all. _

I fought the urge to collapse back into unconsciousness, if only because then I'd fall into the ancestors-forsaken mess around my paws. Flashes of horrible imagery rent my mind, of tearing limbs and Mom falling, and the only one I hadn't seen die was Rin.

For some foolish reason, I searched for her. For some stupid reason, I thought she might have lived. I wanted someone to have survived. Desperately, I wanted it. I wanted to take her back home, wanted to never leave again and pretend they'd be coming back to meet us.

_What I finally found was barely recognizable. Clearly those great jaws had snapped down around her torso and hadn't stopped squeezing, and those lethal talons had left great furrowing wounds, broken flesh

and torn membrane. My body and mind settled into numb detachment. I fought to cry, but the world was shattered around me and not even that seemed adequate enough anymore._

It took a week to bury them all, fighting the buzzards and the flies for time. But I couldn't leave them as they were. It felt like, maybe, after it was done, I would remember how to cry.

72. THE DARK NIGHT RISES

Myst

_I made my slow way back to the island after that, praying for a friendly face in Myst's family. It was long and hard, and I was hungry and broken. There were no nets for sea-fishing and no one to grasp the other corners and dive with_â€œ_and not even an ocean to dive into. Eventually I'd managed to slash at a deer with shadow, but the blow had been sloppy and I'd only buried the corpse. I'd managed to accidentally sever the neck in two, and what was left after that seemed anything but edible._

I continued on hungry, only able to scoop a few fish from a small stream, before the ocean had brought some relief and I'd poked along the beach until I'd found a beached dolphin. It hadn't been the best meal, but it was enough to lend my wings the strength to get me to the island.

What I found there was anything but what I'd hoped for. The bodies were the worst. It looked like they hadn't just been lazily torn to pieces as the other villagers had been, but carved up to scream. Scales were scattered, limbs splintered, flesh tattered. I was lost in a sea of chilled numbness as I searched for Myst's body. I didn't have the strength to vomit again, though it felt like I should never have stopped, like I should have been sobbing.

I broke free for a moment then, reeling in horror and confusion as the images wouldn't _stop. _My own demons were clawing at my chest, other memories mixing with these alien ones I couldn't understand. But, moments later, my focus was pulled back and my stomach felt like it was trying to pull itself up my throat.

Finally, I'd stumbled upon the claw. It was dark and bloody, and had clearly been severed and clawed at by tiny claws. I had the sick desire to laugh. Ancestors, what was our word coming to when the only one of us who'd been able to mark this murderer was a child? A little thing that the Sky Tiger could have swallowed whole if he'd chosen to. Anger budded in my chest, a great growl reverberating from my throat and into the air. I dug my teeth into the severed toe, forcing my element into it.

It fought back. Something leached into my shadows and clawed at my heart, but I was barely coherent enough to care at that point. It fed the feral rage that had tempted me to take my grizzly trophy, and suddenly an alien urge to tear and rip and claw and bite swept away the numbness in my chest.

It took everything I had to shove the claw into its own shadow, fusing it to the earth.

The illusion shattered, leaving us both panting. Kuro's scales were fading before my eyes, black and red softening, becoming translucent. A pool of festering shadow grew in his chest, its core glowing a sick, dark violet. Wings stretched and tore, his neck lengthened, and an unearthly shriek tore from his throat. When his eyes opened, the dark power had flushed away the familiar green, leaving pools of yellow in its wake. Beneath ghostly scales, streaks of green glistened.

He towered above me, cold and feral. In my friend's place was a monster not unlike the one that had stolen my parents away, created by the stagnant darkness that had festered within him for years. The dark magic, the pains, the guilt. Memories of the General, both his and mine, fought to pull me into my nightmares.

My paws felt like they'd sunk into the ground, my wings shaking helplessly. A great maw opened and his teeth snapped shut inches from where I'd just been. I gritted my teeth. The part of me that my friend had left—the courage, the memories, the knowledge to fight—was there within me, and it knew what he would have wanted. The battle-claws strapped to my paws glowed, their blood-coated tips gleaming like fresh fire. Strands of wind wrapped around them and sharpened.

Though I had no knowledge of what had happened, Kuro clearly had. Whatever freak circumstance that had merged some of our memories had told me enough to understand. With this monstrosity, there was no going back. He'd all but faded into an elemental monster.

Duck. Kuro's training guided me to dive under a tail-swoop, the hooked tailblade whistling inches from my head.

* * *

><p>Cynder

Everything hurt. My powers had clearly held on while I'd fallen, as frost still glistened on my scales. My head pounded like hell. Ever since the damned ancestors had yelled at me, something had been distinctly off about my elements. They sure as hell had never hurt me before.

"Why didn't you do something?" I snapped when I saw Kaboa standing beside me, bearing a frown. I wasn't prepared for the equally snappish reply.

"Cynder, you need to control the taint." Her forehead was scrunched in worry, the corners of her mouth pulled down. "Besides your own safety, which should be your top priority, I'm currently made of pure elemental shadow magic. By the time I realized I should be doing something and why I wasn't, you'd already crashed. And, for the love of the ancestors, don't ever try using two furies at once again!"

Flashes of Mom—my real mom, back at the swamp—puffing up and yelling when Sparx had almost gotten eaten, or when I'd tried to eat spoiled food out of hunger, or when I'd fought for too long, played at the back my mind.

That was just as quickly overwhelmed with images of a forest of fire,

huts in disarray, and her fleeting final breaths on a riverbank in the nightmare that was the Chronicler's test.

I wasn't endeared by the resemblance anymore. A deep anger budded in my heart.

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not the fucking hero you all wanted!" I screeched back as my eyes burned. "Maybe I could have been if you'd showed up and told me about any of the shit I'm supposed to do, or...or maybe if someone had told me why any of this is happening! My brother is dead" my voice dropped to a snarl as I struggled to my feet, fishing desperately for the spirit gems in my bagâ€" and I get to look forward to going home and telling Momâ€" my real mom_ "â€"Kaboa flinched back like she'd been slappedâ€" "about how he died because I was being a fucking blind stupid idiot and forgot him!"

I wheeled around, flinching under the glare of a towering golden statue. Something about it sent a chill down my spine, but I was far too angry to wonder about it.

Maybe it should have been Spyro there. Judging by the Chronicler's distaste for me, he would have been worlds' better of a hero. Maybe he would have been a better brother and son than I was a sister and daughter. Deep down I wished I could curl up and leave it all to him. The blood and the death and the sea of corpses wouldn't be on my shoulders anymore. The choices, the mistakes, the hell that would come should we fail.

Some distant part of me wished Kaboa had never come. That my leap had met its conclusion and I had gone to where Sparx was and left my worries to the living. But the world wasn't so kind.

At my paws, tainted shadows continued to eat away at me as I paced onward, my face turned forwards to hide the tears that tried to fall.

* * *

><p>(AN. For those that don't remember, it was explained earlier that 'elementals' are spirits of dragons that put their whole being into a single goal, usually intentionally, and merge fully with their element to become a thoughtless, feral monster that tries to complete the task. As the General, quite a few vengeful parents went after Spyro this way. Kuro isn't exactly this, as the General's darkness merged with his shadow element and hijacked the transformation, turning the 'task' into the General's mission from years ago: wipe out Myst's village.)_

73. WE THE DEAD

Sparx

I shrunk into my little nook, arms pillowied on my chest. It was so much easier to keep the brave face, keep the humor, keep the faith when I wasn't so desperately alone. I just wanted Cyn. Wanted Mom and Dad.

Heh. At least, like this, no one was there to hear me crying. No one

was there to worry about poor, little, _squashable _Sparx. If I showed this face to anyone, they'd tell me to stay in, stay safe, and only go back when my emotions were properly under control and I could worry about keeping nice and not-crushed. It'd happened at home, all the time; little baby Cynder was always sent to do things the elders couldn't. Things that left me behind.

And here I was again. Here, stuck, trapped and waiting. _Hoping.

-

Praying to the stars that maybe, maybe, Cynder would show up and be alright. Show up and save me, because I was so small and uselessâ€"because Cyn's ancestors knew there wasn't much I could do myself.

Heart sinking, I looked at my tiny handsâ€"the hands that couldn't defend Cyn against _anything_. I'd ignored the only magic I had, not that it would do me much good.

I was so sick of seeing my little sis almost die. I felt so damn useless. So damn lost.

I just wanted to be good for _something. _I just wanted to _help._ I hated that my damn species could dictate this uselessness.

I wasn't batshit insane. I wasn't going to declare 'screw it, I'll still try.' I wanted to at this point, and hell knows how hard it would be not to shoot straight to Cynder ifâ€"no, goddamnit, _when_â€"she showed up.

But I couldn't. I would wait until it was safe, because hell knows how Cyn would feel if I made one of my stupid-ass decisions and got myself killed in the process.

* * *

><p>Myst

Claws swished through air a scale's breadth from my wings, and the next swipe clicked against my armor, the tempered steel deflecting the shadow blades with a cold screech. My memories and thoughts were jumbled up, a mix of two puzzles dumped in a pile and interwoven.

I had to line up the pieces.

His and mine.

Bits of me were like a far-off, scattered dream. I'd inherited the heartache for Rina, and part of my heart broke when shadows wouldn't spring forth at my command.

I'd stolen most of him away somehow. Taken it all and left behind this feral, soulless beast of a dragon. Something less than the General. Ghastly, pointless and violent.

And his own memories told me what I had to do. Even if I wasn't sure who I was anymore, I knew that much.

I had to fight.

I had to _win._

Had to _kill._

The Dark Master didn't need another monster. Kuro would have killed himself at the thought of this.

Something caught afire in my chest. Something hot, angry and morbid. A growling, sputtering sense of urgency.

Was this what the others had that I didn't?

Was this what let them kill?

The ball of molten fury trembled and writhed. It clawed up my throat, vibrating. Like a verbal cringe, the growl slipped through my teeth and curdled the air.

And then I was moving, cold determination fueling me as I sent a javelin of wind hissing from my jaws. It slammed through one of the shade's wing membranes, leaving a hole that cried in crimson.

Was this me? Or was this him? Did I want to kill? What ifâ€"

Another blast of Kuro's confidence barreled through my limbs. A bittersweet determination. Even without a soul to guide them, his memories understood. I understood.

He'd been unknowingly leading me here for my murder. The General's darkness had become his, festered in his element. It had mauled away his trepidation as this night grew closer to the horizon.

The beast lunged, and great jaws snapped shut where I'd been seconds ago.

The frantic duck left me under his neck, and, before I knew what I was doing, his instincts were guiding me to flip. I realized morbidly that he must have been fighting for many long years, since the death of everyone we'd known. Otherwise he wouldn't have known how to inflict such damage on something so big. Not when I was this small.

My back legs launched up at the end of my roll, the warm glowing metal that guarded them cutting through flesh. My claws hit something, but it gave. So similar to cutting a fish. The weapons carried on through. He didn't have time to scream, only to falter. In that moment, the world was only the sick wet slurp of tearing muscle. Only a last broken breath.

Only blood raining down to drown me. With that, the dazed apathy of two souls working in tandem snapped.

Whatever magic Viri had begrudgingly bathed the battle claws in, it did not only harm the dead.

Something inside me broke as I stared at the statuesque figure looming above me and raining crimson. I'd used the weapon she'd given me in worry and heartbreak to...to kill him. There was no going back now. Our friend. Both of ours. I lay there shaking as the grizzly mess toppled over me. The enhanced steel had found little barrier in

blood, bone or plating. The neck was half severed, right below the head.

My scales were soaked with blood, dyed in gruesome pinks and crimson.

My chest hurt. The two minds that had intertwined for his murder broke apart, tearing something away that had been part of me. Even if it had only been for seconds, he had been part of me. It tore Rina away, but left the heartache. Lobotomized the memories of battle, but left the instincts and skill. Tore everything that mattered, that was left of my friend, to shreds.

The world was a blur as I blindly struggled back from the ghastly wound. There was a cold friendless chill in the air as I crawled to weep into his shoulder, pressed my muzzle against cooling scales as the heat bled from him.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I wasn't sure if the thoughts were mine or the last whispers of his departing soul in my mind.

I could feel the dead eyes of my family, the world I had grown in, boring into me as the specters descended.

I looked up with a sudden hiccup, finding I couldn't care. If they came to kill, so be it. I deserved it for this devil's errand. I met my mother's gemlike eyes.

A foreign warmth sparked against my chest. I looked down, eyes widening, as the pendent flowed from under my armor. It had become a sea of swirling purple, the golden wings within fluttering like a trapped spirit.

Our gift.

Their voices melded perfectly, but I could hear everyone within it. Between my parents, a black form stalked forwards, and my heart broke.

Thank you.

I locked eyes with the ghost of my victim and found gratitude there.

Save them for me.

Our thoughts brushed again, tendrils of consciousness dancing around each other.

You are their only hope. Let the golden wings lead you.

"Iâ€œ!" My voice sounded out of place amidst the melody of lost spirits. "I don't understandâ€œ."

Only one born of dragons can fix what we have wrought.

"What do you want me to do?" My voice was shrill and broken. I would die for these dragons. Cross the sky for them. But I couldn't do what I did not understand.

Follow. Guide. Protect.

"I don't understand!" I was wailing now.

You will.

74. JUST LIKE ME

Cynder

I had expected many things on the throne of hell. Piled corpses, prisoners, death, blood and gore and some fresh hell. I'd been mentally stripping my fear away until I thought I'd be ready for anything the ape king could throw at me. I'd seen it all before, right?

I wasn't prepared for this. The moment the ravenous howling roar shattered the air, the scraps of twine holding my fragmenting heart together snapped.

I knew that sound.

Hell, how I knew that sound. My wings snapped out to carry me forward as another rumbling roar shook me to the core. There was a hum in the air—a hum of power that sang to my blood. In the center of the great gaping crater, the first thing to draw my eyes was the spear of violet light. My veins longed for it. The shadowy fire that had started creeping along my spine flurried, tugging me forward.

I was wanted. I was needed.

In the world shimmering beyond the veil of violet, there was no grief. No fear. The world around the violet light began to fade. The horror slipped behind the beautiful lie. The noise faded. The slimy, tainted shadows that dogged my heels became warm, safe and welcoming, coaxing my wings to spread, guiding my paws to dance from the edge.

It was the end of pain and panic. I hadn't felt this relaxed in so long. My grief was washed away in the glowing river of calm.

I barely noticed myself moving. One paw reached forth as I landed. I wanted to touch it. Wanted to forget. I just wanted the pain, all of it, to sto—

The moment before my entranced paw brushed into the light, a paw as big as my chest knocked me away. I turned blearily towards my assailant. How dare they?

The towering monster I saw knocked me right out of my pleasant reverie.

The General towered above me, just as I remembered him. Acid dripped from his claws and a venomous green light swirled from his right eye. Spyro's wings had ripped and torn again, and every scrape and scratch that had permanently mauled the monster's hide had returned. His other eye was cold with white light—but there was something there.

I gulped, reaching out a paw as my stomach curdled.

Something in his eyes was the same. Underneath the curdling tainted light, Spyro's soul was pleading at me.

The darkness wrangling my paws sputtered out.

Once more, an old thought swept me away. We were two of a kind.

He was just like me.

"S-Spyro?"

* * *

><p>Spyro</p>

"Cynder." She flinched at our voice. At what had become of us. But, painful as it was, I was more Spyro than I had ever been.

I wasn't the wretched monster that wreaked havoc upon my own kind, gleaning joy from ripping bodies apart.

I wasn't the little dragon who Terra had sung to sleep at night with her purring melodies.

I wasn't the fearful child who'd felt sick at the sight of blood.

I was all of them. I was none of them.

I was something new. Not ours, but mine. They were all me, no matter their differences. I was the child who would starve himself to help the one who'd cared for him, who had handled rancid meat and blown our chance at freedom moments before it had come to pass. I was the monster who would tear into his enemies with claw and tooth and blade. I would sever throats and crush bones into dust.

My tail arced up to slash at Gaul, the unnaturally hardened blade forcing his twin swords to the ground. When I'd seen Cynder, the raw rage of the tyrant and the worry of the child had melded into oneâ€"into me. It was no longer overpowering.

I whipped around to meet Gaul's eyes, expression thunderous. Cynder dazedly stalked to my side. Somehow, she could see meâ€"maybe not for all I was, but she saw her friend in here.

Fear wrenched at me, a worry that she would not understand my will to accept my darkness. To use it. Her own darkness, my darkness, terrified her more than I could understand. Especially after the Angel's Folly, I had sensed how fearful her helplessness made her, in any form. Helplessness to her own shadows was only worse.

I heard claws clip the ground beside us, but they did not startle Cynder and so they did not startle me. I glanced back and stared at the towering wraith of a shadow dragon, who stared at Gaul with cold fury fit to rend continents and shatter bones.

Something in me quailed at the sight of her as her wings flagged out, tendrils of shadow snaking from the tips and sharpening, reaching for the Ape King like starved beasts.

I darted my head back when I heard Gaul squeal like a petrified child, his staff shaking in front of him like a shield.

"Impossible."

The strange wraith had begun to move forward, each foot hitting the ground with a thud that somehow housed the finality of a guillotine, claws clicking on the ground. A solid tailblade dragged on the floor behind her. It created a cold sound like claws on stone.

Shlick. She drove it into the stone, sharpening it.

Thump. The pad of her paw met the ground. The ethereal shadows were melting back into her, leaving behind them any separation she had from the mortal realm.

Click. Click. Click. Slowly, deliberately, each claw struck the ground. I could plainly see that, to Gaul, the sound was as torturous as any agony.

"Tyrant." The first swipe came, barely dodged. I did not know what drove him to fear this dragon that wore Cynder's eyes so, but it dominated him now.

"Traitor." She was toying with him like a playful feline. That blow had brushed across his mass of fur, lashing off a few grey strands and leaving them to fall to the cold stone floor.

The calm expression that had before ridden beneath the creature's hard eyes wrinkled and writhed, a roar sending flecks of shadow and spittle blasting over the tyrannical ape's face.

"Egg-breaker!"

End
file.